

**NEGOTIATING BODIES IN LATE ANTIQUITY:
EMPRESS THEODORA AND AL-KHAYZURAN**

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by

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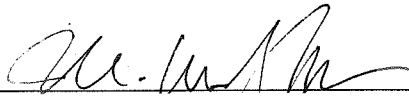
Thesis of Javier C. Gonzalez-Meeks:

Negotiating Bodies in Late Antiquity:

Empress Theodora and Al-Khayzuran



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DEDICATION

For my Nana: even though she never saw the completion of this thesis, she provided an attentive ear during its formative stages. I would also like to thank my parents, Nina, and Sharon and Karl Meeks for their endless encouragement and financial assistance. To Ray Lacoste, who engaged me and encouraged me on my academic journey. I am especially thankful to my spouse Moriah without whom this project would never have been completed. And to Gabe, who came into this world and brought joy and happiness to both of his parents.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Negotiating Bodies in Late Antiquity:
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by

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This thesis argues that Byzantine empress Theodora (d. 548 CE) and al-Khayzuran (d. 789 CE), mother and wife of Abbasid caliphs, manipulated and challenged existing expectations to exercise political, religious, and economic power. They achieved upward mobility through the use of their female bodies, first as slaves, then concubines, and then as wives, maternal-figures, and rulers. They exercised power: funding construction of religious buildings, offering charity to the poor, undertaking religious pilgrimages, protecting the weak, financing infrastructure improvements, and quelling political dissent. This comparison demonstrates that despite differences in time and place, the lives and depictions of Theodora and al-Khayzuran, and the gender expectations for imperial women in both the Byzantine Empire and Abbasid caliphate were similar. Both women rose to power during similar periods of transition and empire formation, resulting in comparably ambivalent representations of both female rulers by their contemporary writers.

To investigate the reasons for and the nature of these similarities, this thesis analyzes sometimes hostile male authors' depictions of these women's political, religious, and economic actions. Male authors from late antiquity attempted to articulate appropriate behaviors for imperial women to emulate. Procopius, a sixth-century Byzantine historian, and al-Tabari, a ninth-century Abbasid historian, praised and criticized Theodora and al-Khayzuran, respectively, in their roles first as slaves and concubines, and later as wives, mothers, and rulers. John Malalas, a sixth-century Byzantine chronicler, and al-Masudi, a tenth-century Abbasid historian, portrayed the actions of the "ideal" female body as generosity towards the disenfranchised, providing public works of philanthropy, and maintaining the political dynasty. These expectations were not modeled after the lives of Empress Theodora and al-Khayzuran but from the memory of previous women who set the appropriate behaviors of piety and regality. This project deploys a gendered approach to read between the lines of Procopius, al-Tabari, Malalas, and al-Masudi to determine how these women were able to negotiate power as imperial leaders. This analysis aims to analyze gendered power structures and how they operated within Late Antique Byzantine and Abbasid societies.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Theodora was the wife of emperor Justinian of the Byzantine Empire from 525 to her death in 548 CE. Al-Khayzuran, who died in 789 CE, was wife of the Abbasid caliph al-Mahdi from 775/776 CE until his death in 785 CE and mother of caliphs al-Hadi (b. 761 CE) and al-Rashid (b. 763 CE). These imperial women of late antiquity,¹ although from different times and places, were subject to similar expectations regarding their public and private behavior. Procopius, a sixth-century Byzantine historian, and al-Tabari, a ninth-century Abbasid historian, praised, and criticized contemporary female rulers based on their roles as wives, mothers, and queens. Piety, maternity, and separation from government affairs were the expectations for female rulers recorded by these authors; consequently Theodora and al-Khayzuran were criticized for having participated in government affairs. In *Secret History*, Procopius accused Theodora of greed, self-indulgence, and of exerting excessive power in her running of the Byzantine Empire as she stripped elite men of their wealth and social rank.² In *The History of Prophets and Kings*, al-Tabari recorded caliph al-Hadi reprimanding his mother al-Khayzuran for her involvement in the affairs of the state, stating that she should keep her mind focused on God and not court politics.³

¹ For the purposes of this project late antiquity will refer to the period of time between 500-800 CE. Some historians argue that late antiquity ended prior to the eighth century, but other scholars in the field argue that late antiquity should include the Umayyad caliphate and the early Abbasid caliphate. Glen Warren Bowersock et al., "Introduction," in *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1999), ix.

² Procopius, *Secret History*, trans. G. A. Williamson (London: Penguin Books, 1981), 115.

³ Al-Tabari, *The Abbasid Caliphate in Equilibrium*, vol. 30, *The History of al-Tabari*, trans. C. E. Bosworth (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989). The Abbasid Caliphate in Equilibrium is part of

Yet not all writers condemned these strong female rulers. Theodora was depicted more positively by John Malalas, a sixth-century Byzantine chronicler, as was al-Khayzuran by al-Masudi, a tenth-century Abbasid historian. These writers characterized the ideal actions of imperial women as offering generosity towards the disenfranchised, providing public works of philanthropy, and maintaining the political dynasty, all of which were activities in which Theodora and al-Khayzuran engaged. This thesis explores the relationship between the more critical condemnation of these women's political, religious, and transacting bodies by some male authors and the more sympathetic representation by others, as well as how these depictions related to existing models of women's behavior. The expectations of John Malalas and al-Masudi were not modeled after the lives of Empress Theodora and al-Khayzuran but from their memory of prior elite women who set the appropriate behavior for imperial women to emulate. Procopius and al-Tabari also based their expectations after previous women when Theodora and al-Khayzuran did not meet the ideal model for imperial women. Theodora and al-Khayzuran were slandered to a large degree because they were not of noble lineage, but were sex slaves who rose to power through their marriages to imperial men, Justinian and al-Mahdi, later becoming powerful queens in their own right.

Apart from unpacking the authors' representations, this research will demonstrate how Theodora and al-Khayzuran achieved upward mobility and were then able to exercise political, religious, and economic power. They were able to accomplish these actions through the use of their female bodies, first as slaves, then as concubines, and then as wives and as female rulers. They exercised power through a variety of avenues including, funding the construction of religious buildings, being charitable to the poor, undertaking religious pilgrimages, protecting the weak, financing infrastructure improvements, and quelling political dissent. Theodora and al-Khayzuran both challenged and manipulated existing expectations to assert power in their own right, as political, religious, and transacting bodies.

a forty-volume, English translation of al-Tabari's ninth-century work, *The History of Kings and Prophets*.

JUSTINIANIC DYNASTY

The Justinianic dynasty began with the reign of Justin I in 518 CE and ended with the death of Maurice in 602 CE, in the Byzantine Empire. The rise of political and economic power for Theodora occurred during the first ten years of the Justinianic dynasty when she ruled alongside her husband Justinian. The Byzantine Empire was the continuation of the eastern part of the Roman Empire, with its capital located at Constantinople, which had been founded by Emperor Constantine in 330 CE. The territories that made up the Byzantine Empire at the start of Justinian's reign included the Balkans, Asia Minor, the Levant, and Egypt. The Western part of the Roman Empire had devolved into various Germanic states, which blended Roman customs with their own Germanic traditions. The Byzantine Empire maintained its political presence in the eastern Mediterranean and even expanded during the reign of Justinian.

Justin I, Justinian's uncle, was selected by the Byzantine Emperor Anastasius I to succeed him, beginning the Justinianic dynasty in 518 CE. Justin I was a farmer from the Balkan region and later joined the military, in which he had a very successful career. Justin I, much like Anastasius I, did not have any sons and was not very familiar with court politics. He later adopted his nephew Justinian as his legal son, who assisted him with court politics and ensured the continuation of the dynasty when Justinian was selected as co-emperor in 527 CE. Justin I died in 527 CE at which time Justinian became emperor and Theodora became empress; Justinian was the second emperor of the Justinianic dynasty, taking office nine years after the dynasty was formed. Prior to his death, Justin I repealed an imperial law that forbade high ranking men from marrying women from the lower class.⁴ This legal change allowed Justinian to marry Theodora, who had grown up as a circus performer and prostitute, and gave her equal social status to Justinian. Theodora served as an equal in court politics with Justinian until her death in 548 CE. She did not leave behind a male heir but her legacy, in imagery and in histories, endured. Justinian never remarried after Theodora's death and he chose his nephew, the son of his sister Vigilantia, Justin II, as his successor when he

⁴ Justin I changed this law in 525 CE.

died in 565 CE. Later in his reign, Justin II suffered from mental illness and much of the imperial administration relied upon his wife Sophia, niece of Theodora, together with the military officer Tiberius, who before Justin II's death was named as his adopted son and heir.⁵ The Justinianic dynasty continued until the death of Maurice, Tiberius' adopted son, in 602 CE. Justinian and Theodora were not of noble lineage and the former emperor Anastasius' family and other nobles most likely were frustrated that the imperial crown rested upon nonmembers of the Byzantine aristocracy.

The Justinianic dynasty was at its political height during the reign of Justinian, as he expanded the Byzantine borders, created a unified legal code, and enforced religious orthodoxy. Justinian's reign as emperor witnessed the largest territorial expansion during the early period of the Justinianic dynasty. During his reign, Justinian financed military campaigns that expanded the empire to include more territories in North Africa, southern Iberia, and the Italian Peninsula. Justinian was also on the military defensive as the Persian Sasanian Empire continued military advancements into the Levant. Another ambitious policy effected by Justinian was the codification of the existing legal codes into a simplified legal code. The Justinianic Code and the Digest and Institutes, later referred to as *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, were completed in 529 CE. Justinian's ambition to regain the lost territories of the Imperial Roman Empire never came to fruition much like his unsuccessful religious policy of enforcing Christian orthodoxy.

Justinian enforced strict adherence to the rulings from the Council of Chalcedon for the Byzantine Christian populace, which was evident in the religious oppression of the anti-Chalcedonian Christians, or Monophysites.⁶ Nonetheless, the persecution of Monophysites was quelled once he was married to Theodora, as she belonged to the Monophysite Christian community. Other religious groups that faced persecution were Jews and Pagans. Justinian

⁵ James Allen Stewart Evans, *The Empress Theodora: Partner of Justinian* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 117.

⁶ The Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE defined the nature of Christ as consisting of two parts, one human and the other divine. Yet a small minority of Christians in Byzantium argued that Christ had one nature, which was both human and divine. Members of this group would be labeled as Monophysites by the Chalcedonian Church and were deemed heretics.

strictly regulated the practice of both Judaism and paganism in the Byzantine Empire by converting synagogues into Christian churches, by banning the reading of the Mishnah, and by closing the pagan Neoplatonic School in Athens in 529 CE. Despite Justinian's best efforts to enforce Chalcedonian Christianity, the Monophysite community persevered with help from Empress Theodora.⁷ This historical context provides a foundation for understanding Theodora's rise to power, her place within the Justinianic dynasty, and her role as empress of the Byzantine Empire.

ABBASID DYNASTY

The Abbasid caliphate was established after the successful revolution in 750 CE against the Umayyad caliphate.⁸ The Umayyad dynasty had lasted from 661 CE to 750 CE, and its territory reached from Iberia to northern Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, the Levant, and Persia. Public dissatisfaction had grown against the Umayyads as only Arab Muslims were granted prestigious political appointments; the Umayyad caliph Muawiyah, in 661 CE, had sanctioned the cursing of Ali (son-in-law of Mohammed) from the pulpits; and the grandson and other family members of the Prophet were killed at the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE for their refusal to give their allegiance to the Umayyad caliph Yazid. The Abbasid Revolution in 750 CE had gathered large support against the Umayyad caliphate, especially from the Shiite community. The Abbasids claimed a closer blood relationship to the Prophet as opposed to the Umayyads, as Abbas was the Prophet's uncle and his brother Abu Talib raised the Prophet as his own son. The Abbasids wiped out the entire Umayyad family, except for Abd al-Rahman I, who escaped to Iberia and later established his own separate state in Iberia. The Abbasids were more inclusive in their politics and allowed non-Arabs who converted to Islam to hold prestigious political appointments. They relocated the capital from the city of Damascus to Baghdad and expanded into western India and took away more

⁷ On Justinian's religious policies, see James Allen Stewart Evans, *The Age of Justinian: The Circumstances of Imperial Power* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

⁸ See Hugh Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World: The Rise and Fall of Islam's Greatest Dynasty* (Cambridge: Da Capo, 2005) for more information about the Abbasid Revolution.

territories from the Byzantine Empire during the reign of Harun al-Rashid, son of al-Khayzuran. The caliphs of the Abbasid dynasty changed the political interactions with their subjects and the reign of al-Rashid witnessed the cultural flourishing of knowledge and commercial growth throughout the Abbasid caliphate.⁹

Participants in the Abbasid Revolution rallied behind Abbas, the uncle of the Prophet, but it was al-Saffah, a distant relative of Abbas, who initiated the Abbasid dynasty in 750 CE. Al-Saffah's claim to be caliph upset Shiites in the community as they hoped that their own imam, a direct descendant of Muhammad, would become the new caliph. Unfortunately this transition of power did not happen, which further divided the Shiite and Sunni communities. Al-Saffah had been a shrewd ruler who had killed off his rivals. He married Umm Salama, a former member of the Umayyad aristocracy. Al-Saffah had male heirs but they were too young so he passed the caliphate to his brother, al-Mansur, when he died. Al-Mansur continued the policy of inclusion of non-Arab Muslims in political appointments and ensured peace with his Jewish and Christian subjects through the *jizya* tax. Yet the reign of al-Mansur witnessed the continued persecution of the Zoroastrian community, as their temples were either burned or converted into mosques.¹⁰ Despite the religious persecution of the Zoroastrian community, al-Mansur was remembered as a pious ruler who frequently recited the Friday prayers. On one of his pilgrimages to Mecca, al-Mansur encountered the slave girl al-Khayzuran and purchased her for his son al-Mahdi, who succeeded him when he died in 775 CE.

Al-Mahdi, third caliph of the Abbasid dynasty, began his rule in 775 CE, twenty-five years after the Abbasid Revolution. The same year, al-Khayzuran became queen after al-Mahdi manumitted and married her; she had already borne him two male heirs, Musa al-Hadi and Harun al-Rashid. While al-Khayzuran lived more than two centuries after Theodora in

⁹ See Benson Bobrick, *The Caliph's Splendor: Islam and the West in the Golden Age of Baghdad* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012) for more information of the cultural "renaissance" during the reign of caliph Harun al-Rashid.

¹⁰ See Bobrick, *The Caliph's Splendor*, for more information about al-Mansur's policies towards non-Muslim communities.

Byzantium, the time in which al-Khayzuran lived and exerted her power was a similar moment of transition and empire formation, resulting in comparably ambivalent representations of both female rulers by their contemporary writers. When al-Mahdi died in a hunting accident away from Baghdad in 785 CE, he was succeeded by his eldest son by al-Khayzuran, Musa al-Hadi. Al-Khayzuran continued to run political appointments during this period, which she had done during al-Mahdi's reign, but al-Hadi grew tired of her influence and prohibited her from participating in court politics. Al-Hadi's reign was short, as there are conflicting reports about his untimely death in 786 CE; he either died from an ulcer or was killed by one of his mother's female attendants. Regardless, al-Khayzuran protected her younger son al-Rashid from potential fratricide and enjoyed a successful political career with him as caliph, from 786 CE until her death in 789 CE. An example of al-Khayzuran's influence was in marriage arrangements she made between her sons and other members of her own family. She arranged the marriage between her niece Zubaidah and her son al-Rashid. Al-Khayzuran's son, al-Rashid, enjoyed a prosperous reign as caliph, which has been described as the Islamic Golden Age for its advancements in math, science, and philosophy. The Abbasid dynasty continued into the thirteenth century but it was during al-Khayzuran's lifetime that the Abbasid caliphate prospered financially and religiously.

From al-Mansur to al-Rashid, the Abbasids attempted to maintain religious orthodoxy within the Islamic community while also protecting the Jewish and Christian communities. The first two caliphs, al-Saffah and al-Mansur, alienated themselves from the Shiite community, which furthered the rift between the Abbasids and the Shiites. Al-Mansur initially offered political appointments to the descendants of Muhammad but many refused as the Shiite community viewed the Abbasids as illegitimate as the Umayyads.¹¹ In 762 CE, a Shiite rebellion against Abbasid rule failed and only consolidated al-Mansur's political and religious authority.¹² Al-Mahdi, however, renewed efforts in peacemaking with the family of Ali and the Shiite community. He frequently preached from the pulpit during Friday prayers

¹¹ Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World*, 21.

¹² Ibid., 26.

and sat with the commoners in the mosque. When al-Rashid became caliph, after his brother al-Hadi's death in 786 CE, he made nine pilgrimages to Mecca, an unprecedented action from any member of the Abbasid dynasty.¹³ During the initial years of his reign, al-Rashid allowed his vizier Yahya to command affairs of the state but they were done with the approval of al-Khayzuran. The early period of the Abbasid dynasty witnessed the power struggle between their dynastic rule and with the Shiite community.

INITIAL COMPARISONS

Both the Justinianic and the Abbasid dynasties established their authority against internal and external rivals. Justinian and al-Mahdi consolidated their power through the enforcement of religious orthodoxy and political alliances. Justinian and his uncle, Justin I, were viewed with contempt by the Byzantine aristocracy because of their humble origins. Justin I was illiterate and Justinian married the former prostitute Theodora, which caused dissatisfaction among the wealthy nobles in Constantinople. In the same way, the Shiite community viewed the Abbasid dynasty with contempt for not having one of the descendants of Muhammad as leader of the Muslim community. Nonetheless, both Justinian and al-Mahdi attempted to enforce religious orthodoxy as a means of consolidating their power and legitimacy, and during those respective attempts at consolidation, Theodora and al-Khayzuran were active in court politics. Despite the fact that men were the preferred leaders in both the Justinianic dynasty and the Abbasid dynasty, these two new empires prospered under the active leadership of both Theodora and al-Khayzuran.

While Theodora and al-Khayzuran are from different times and regions, there are many similarities in the empires that they ruled and in their life trajectories. They both began life as poor women of low status, then they married imperial heirs, and later became rulers in their own right. In addition, gendered roles for women, specifically prescribed expectations of femininity for female co-rulers, were similar for women in both sixth-century Byzantine Empire and the ninth-century Abbasid caliphate. Theodora and al-Khayzuran's similarities

¹³ Ibid., 65.

provide the basis for a fruitful comparative analysis of female rulership in nascent dynasties in late antiquity.

This study is the first comparative analysis of the lives, rulership, and complex representations of Theodora and al-Khayzuran. Apart from this research, the closest to a comparison between Theodora and al-Khayzuran came from Nabia Abbott's *Two Queens of Baghdad*, in which she stated that the Abbasid court did not have a Procopius, as in Justinian's court, to provide so many details of the life of al-Khayzuran.¹⁴ Nonetheless, the information provided by al-Tabari and al-Masudi, supplemented by Abbott's research and translations, provides enough information to make this comparison possible. Furthermore, *Secret History* was not known to the public until it was found in the Vatican Library in 1623, one-thousand and seventy-five years after the death of Theodora. Within the last twenty-years, historians have critically analyzed the lives and gendered expectations of Theodora and al-Khayzuran, but separately. This project will include contemporary scholarship on both Theodora and al-Khayzuran, including a postmodernist approach to power and gender, as articulated by Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. This comparison shows that despite differences in time and place, the lives of Theodora and al-Khayzuran, and the gender expectations in both the Byzantine Empire and Abbasid caliphate, were similar in regards to imperial women.

Gender roles reveal power structures. They reveal what is important to a society, namely, "male" and "female" roles. Sometimes, prescribed gender roles do not fit so easily into a certain community. By looking at the past and evaluating how gender roles were defined, reinforced, and prescribed, we can understand how they are also constructed in the present. This approach is aimed at challenging grand historical narratives that focus exclusively on "Great Men" of history. Both Theodora and al-Khayzuran were not born into the nobility but through their marriage to Justinian and to al-Mahdi they were able to rise up the social ladder to become queens who wielded their power from within the palace.

¹⁴ Nabia Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad: Mother and Wife of Hārūn al-Rashīd* (London: Al Saqi, 1986), 129.

Historians from late antiquity, like Procopius and al-Tabari, provided their societal expectations for women of nobility within their histories. When both Theodora and al-Khayzuran failed to perform the normative female roles for rulers they were admonished for their subversion of gendered expectations more than they were praised for their leadership.

HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THEODORA

The main source for the analysis of Theodora is Procopius' *Secret History*. Written around 550 CE, it was an unpublished account that presented a slanderous description of the Byzantine rulers Justinian and Theodora, as well as General Belisarius and his wife Antonina. Procopius' *Secret History*, in part an invective of Theodora, is useful as it revealed Procopius' personal gendered expectations of rulers and the roles that should be performed by women within their social class. Yet Procopius gave a different portrayal of Theodora in his two published histories, *History of the Wars* and *Buildings*. In *Wars*, Theodora was praised for her courageous speech during the Nika Revolt,¹⁵ and in *Buildings*, she was commended with Justinian for their generosity in building guest houses for those traveling to visit them.¹⁶

John of Ephesus, a contemporary of Procopius, offered a positive portrayal of the pious empress. In *The Ecclesiastical History*, Theodora was revered for her commitment to the Monophysite Christian community. John commented that Theodora was a "devoted member of the Monophysite party [and] . . . had built and endowed at Constantinople numerous monasteries."¹⁷ Theodora even constructed convents for nuns who were persecuted for their Monophysite association.¹⁸ In the *Lives of Thomas and Stephen*, also written by John of Ephesus, he was well aware of Theodora's past life as a prostitute but that does not

¹⁵ Procopius, *History of the Wars, Secret History, and Buildings*, trans. Averil Cameron (New York: Twayne, 1967), I.1.24:37-43.

¹⁶ Ibid., 339-340.

¹⁷ John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.4.3, 1.

¹⁸ Ibid., 1.4.10, 6-7.

diminish his depiction of her.¹⁹ For John of Ephesus, the only prescription of normative femininity was to be devoted to the Church, specifically the Monophysite Church, which Theodora did enthusiastically throughout her life as the empress.

The Greek chroniclers John Malalas and Theophanes praised Theodora for her philanthropy and piety, despite the fact that they did not belong to the Monophysite community. In his *Chronicle*, John Malalas, a sixth-century lawyer from Antioch, praised Theodora for her financial support during her visit to Antioch after a devastating earthquake that occurred in 526 CE. Theophanes, a ninth-century Byzantine chronicler, also praised Theodora for her piety. Theophanes wrote that “she showed much liberality to the churches, poorhouses, and monasteries.”²⁰ In addition, Theophanes related an account of Theodora’s hiding of the deposed Monophysite bishop Anthimos in her palace in order to protect him.²¹ It is similar to Procopius’ account in *Secret History*, though he viewed her actions in a negative fashion whereas Theophanes found them praiseworthy. Theophanes concluded by stating that the empress “died piously.”²² Theophanes was a nobleman, like Procopius, before he became a monk and even while his noble status is often given as the main reason for Procopius’ antipathy toward Theodora, nowhere in his *Chronicle* did Theophanes slander Theodora.

In the *Chronicle* written by Michael the Syrian in the twelfth century CE, Theodora was depicted as being faithful to and supportive of the Monophysite Christian community. Theodora helped the persecuted members of this community, feeding and housing over five hundred men and women who had been driven out of their homes in Greece and Syria.²³ Michael the Syrian described her as charitable and nowhere in the *Chronicle* was she maligned for her low born status. Ironically, Michael incorrectly recorded that she was the

¹⁹ John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints* 13.

²⁰ Theophanes, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern History, AD 284-813*, AM 6025.

²¹ Ibid., 329.

²² Ibid.

²³ Michael the Syrian, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien* 20.

daughter of an orthodox priest.²⁴ Nevertheless, apart from the slanderous account of *Secret History*, Theodora was depicted as a faithful, charitable, and powerful ruler.

The more recent historiography of Theodora has approached the empress in a variety of ways. Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776) used Procopius' account of Theodora in *Secret History* as credible evidence of her lifestyle prior to becoming empress and never questioned the motive or authenticity of the document in comparison to Procopius' other published works. Nineteenth-century historian John Bagnell Bury questioned the authorship and reliability of *Secret History* in his *Late Roman Empire* (1889); he argued that it was not constructed by Procopius and it was a product of its time, which reflected the feelings of Justinian's rule.²⁵ Bury further argued that *Secret History* was not a reliable source for the deeds of Theodora, as there were inconsistencies between Procopius' published works and *Secret History*.²⁶ A. H. M. Jones, in *The Later Roman Empire* (1964), argued that *Secret History* did not deserve any attention as a historical document.²⁷ Nonetheless, a new paradigm shift occurred towards the end of the twentieth century as social historians, influenced by postmodernism, challenged traditional historical interpretations and grand narratives that had ignored the status of women in the historical record. Averil Cameron's *Procopius* (1985) provides a comprehensive analysis of Procopius' works, especially concerning Theodora. Cameron argues that Procopius disliked "women in power [and disliked] low-born people that gave themselves airs [and that the] emancipation of women, in whatever form, would be an unmitigated evil."²⁸ Judith Herrin's essay, "The Imperial Feminine in Byzantium" (2000), describes Theodora as expressing her authority

²⁴ Ibid., 189.

²⁵ John Bagnell Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire: From the Death of Theodosius I to the Death of Justinian* (London: Macmillan, 1923), 355.

²⁶ Ibid., 363.

²⁷ A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire, 284-602: A Social, Economic, and Administrative Survey*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.)

²⁸ Averil Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century* (London: Duckworth, 1985), 82.

from within the women's quarters of the palace.²⁹ Liz James's *Empresses and Power in Early Byzantium* (2001) analyzes how Byzantine empresses exercised their power and influence from within the palace.³⁰ Leslie Brubaker's 2004 essay, "Sex, Lies, and Textuality," examines the rhetoric of gender within Procopius' *Secret History*. Brubaker argues that *Secret History*'s slanderous account of Theodora was written solely to depict Justinian as a bad leader, so comparing *Secret History* to Procopius' other works regarding Theodora is futile.³¹

James Allen Evans's *The Empress Theodora* (2002) provides the most up-to-date analysis of Empress Theodora, combining all of Procopius' works as well as Syriac sources like John of Ephesus, which praise the good works of Empress Theodora. Evans's research on Theodora focuses on her religious conviction in supporting the Monophysites, whom Evans suggests were waning in popularity but, with the support of Theodora, continued to prosper.³² Evans's subsequent book, *The Power Game in Byzantium* (2011), continues his research on Theodora, focusing on how both Theodora and Antonina advanced their political agendas in court politics despite their humble origins.³³ In his 2015 unpublished paper, "Theodora: Fantasy and Faction," David Potter presents his own analysis of Theodora, arguing that despite Theodora being a social outsider due to her humble origins, she became the ultimate insider, as she gathered political allies who helped her maintain her political power.³⁴

²⁹ Judith Herrin, "The Imperial Feminine in Byzantium," *Past and Present* 169 (November 2000), 32.

³⁰ Liz James, *Empresses and Power in Early Byzantium* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 2001).

³¹ Leslie Brubaker, "Sex, Lies and Textuality: The Secret History of Prokopios and the Rhetoric of Gender in Sixth-Century Byzantium," in *Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300-900*, ed. Leslie Brubaker and Julia M. H. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 83.

³² Evans, *The Empress Theodora*.

³³ James Allen Stewart Evans, *The Power Game in Byzantium: Antonina and the Empress Theodora* (London: Continuum, 2011).

³⁴ David Potter, "Theodora: Fantasy and Faction" (lecture, University of California San Diego, San Diego, CA, February 9, 2015); David Potter's *Theodora: Actress, Empress, Saint* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) was published in November 2015, which was after this thesis was written and too late to be included in this thesis.

The existing works on Theodora emphasize how she was represented by Procopius, her relationship with Justinian, her role in the Monophysite church, and her power as a ruler. The recent historiography minimizes the political rivalry between Theodora and Anicia Juliana, her efforts to conceive a male heir, and the legacy of epigraphs on church buildings. This project fills these lacunae and demonstrates the similarities between the gendered expectations for, and the actions taken by, Theodora and al-Khayzuran.

HISTORIOGRAPHY OF AL-KHAYZURAN

The main source for the analysis of al-Khayzuran comes from *The History of Prophets and Kings* written by the ninth-century Abbasid historian al-Tabari. Al-Tabari's *History* presented a neutral depiction of al-Khayzuran, especially when dealing with her possible involvement in the death of her eldest son, caliph al-Hadi. In *Meadows of Gold*, al-Masudi, a tenth-century Abbasid historian, did not discuss the political tension between al-Khayzuran and her son al-Hadi, and he did not implicate al-Khayzuran in the death of al-Hadi. Al-Masudi briefly mentioned al-Khayzuran's involvement in politics, as he recalled how the poet Abu al-Maafi commented on the large number of government officials who stood outside of al-Khayzuran's door: "Gently now, Khaizuran! Stop and let your sons govern their subjects."³⁵

Early historians focused solely on al-Khayzuran's involvement with the death of her eldest son al-Hadi. Jalaluddin al-Suyuti's *History of Caliphs*, written in the late fifteenth century, mentioned as one of the possible reasons for al-Hadi's death his mother's upset with her son for breaking his father's vow of naming his younger brother next in line for succession. Al-Suyuti also acknowledged that al-Khayzuran was the only woman in Islamic history to bear two caliphs, quoting from a poem by Marwan ibn Abi Hafsa;

O Khayzuran, rejoice thee and again rejoice!
For thy two sons have come to rule the universe.³⁶

³⁵ Al-Masudi, *The Meadows of Gold: the Abbasids* 6.268-70.

³⁶ Jalalu'ddin Al-Suyuti, *History of the Caliphs* 786.

William Muir, in *The Caliphate: Its Rise, Decline and Fall* (1892), mentioned al-Khayzuran but only her possible involvement in the death of her son al-Hadi and not her actions in the political sphere.³⁷

Modern historians have taken various approaches in their analysis of al-Khayzuran. Nabia Abbott's *Two Queens of Baghdad* (1946) provides the most thorough narrative of al-Khayzuran, incorporating primary source documents into a cohesive text. Abbott presents an Abbasid queen who was not docile in her harem and was very much involved in court politics.³⁸ Yet subsequent historians have failed to appreciate the influence wielded by al-Khayzuran as a ruler in the Abbasid court. Hugh Kennedy's *The Early Abbasid Caliphate* (1981) and his *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates* (1986), provide a wealth of information of the deeds of "Great Men"; he does not, however, provide a thorough investigation into the power and influence of al-Khayzuran within the Abbasid court.³⁹ Fatima Mernissi's *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* (1993) provides a more detailed analysis of the power and influence of al-Khayzuran, specifically in regards to her ruling the Abbasid court from within the women's quarter of the palace.⁴⁰ Kennedy later produced two new monographs, *The Court of the Caliphs* (2004) and *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World* (2005), which provide more information about al-Khayzuran and her influence within the women's quarter but his overall analysis when he discusses al-Khayzuran's involvement in court politics is in regards to the "decline and fall" of the Abbasid caliphate.⁴¹ Julia Bray's essay, "Men, Women, and Slaves" (2004), discusses how al-Khayzuran was able to rise up

³⁷ William Muir, *The Caliphate: Its Rise, Decline and Fall, from Original Sources* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1892).

³⁸ Abbot, *Two Queens of Baghdad*.

³⁹ Hugh Kennedy, *The Early Abbasid Caliphate: A Political History* (London: Croom Helm, 1981); Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates: The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century* (London: Longman, 1986).

⁴⁰ Fatima Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 62.

⁴¹ Hugh Kennedy, *The Court of the Caliphs: The Rise and Fall of Islam's Greatest Dynasty* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2004); Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World*.

the social ladder from a concubine to Abbasid queen while also being able to place some of her family members into important positions within the caliphate.⁴² Nadia Maria El Cheikh's essays, "Gender and Politics in the harems of al-Muqtadir" (2004) and "Revisiting the Abbasid Harems" (2005), analyze how women in the harem negotiated power and expressed their agency from within the palace.⁴³ Cheikh does not specifically discuss al-Khayzuran but her analysis of women who negotiated power from within the women's quarter provides a useful analysis for how al-Khayzuran reinforced her power from within the same space.

The recent English-language historiography on al-Khayzuran highlights her relationship with her son al-Hadi and his death supposedly at her hands; it characterizes her primarily as power hungry and focuses on her rise from concubine to wife and later mother of caliphs. Most discussions of her rule are depicted negatively. The historiography omits discussions of her piety, her positive motherly actions, and her efforts to stabilize and preserve the Abbasid caliphate for her family. This study works to fill these omissions and, through a comparison with Byzantine Theodora, to provide a more balanced approach to al-Khayzuran's life and actions as a female ruler.

CHAPTER ORGANIZATION

This thesis analyzes and interprets a variety of primary and secondary sources related to Theodora and al-Khayzuran's upbringings and reigns, exploring the comparable gendered expectations for imperial women in the formative years of both the Byzantine Empire and the Abbasid caliphate. To that end, the following chapters explore the range of female agency exerted by Theodora and al-Khayzuran and how it matches up with expectations for imperial women as demonstrated by ideal political, religious, and economic models. Chapter Two

⁴² Julia Bray, "Men, Women and Slaves in Abbasid Society," in *Gender in the Early Medieval World. East and West, 300-900*, ed. Leslie Brubaker and Julia M. H. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 134.

⁴³ Nadia Maria El Cheikh, "Gender and Politics: The Harem of al-Muqtadir," in *Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300-900*, ed. Leslie Brubaker and Julia M. H. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 147-61; Nadia Maria El Cheikh, "Revisiting the Abbasid Harems," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 1 (2005): 1-19.

examines “ideal models” of women in late antiquity including the Virgin Mary, Aisha, Fatima, and Domitia, and compares them to depictions of Theodora and al-Khayzuran. Chapter Two also analyzes femininity as performed through the actions of Theodora and al-Khayzuran within the palace. The female quarters, namely the Byzantine *gynaikonitis* and the Abbasid harem, became the vehicles for both these female rulers to negotiate power and express their agency. The main sources for comparison are Procopius’ *Secret History* and al-Tabari’s *History of Prophets and Kings*. These texts are supplemented by the Quran, to evaluate gender expectations in the Abbasid caliphate, and John of Ephesus’ *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, which depicted a more positive picture of Empress Theodora. The lives of the late antique female rulers Theodora and al-Khayzuran, as portrayed by male historians, provide similar parallels in regards to their rise to power, the expectations they were subject to, and their violation of these expectations.

Chapter Three evaluates expectations of piety for imperial women within both societies and the pious practices in which Theodora and al-Khayzuran engaged. The analysis begins with an evaluation of “ideal models” of piety, Helena, Saint Macrina, Flaccilla, Aisha, and Zainab, and discusses how Theodora and al-Khayzuran compared to these models. Procopius’ *Secret History* and *Building*, John Malalas’ *Chronicle*, John of Ephesus’ *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, and al-Masudi’s *Meadows of Gold* are the main sources utilized in Chapter Three, along with funeral orations by Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory Nazianzen. This chapter focuses on the pious acts of Theodora and al-Khayzuran, specifically their religious pilgrimages, philanthropy, protection of the weak, and the construction of religious buildings, and how they used these acts of piety to strengthen and reinforce their political power.

Chapter 4 explores how Theodora and al-Khayzuran acquired, maintained, and utilized their wealth. It begins with an overview of ideal economic models for women: Pulcheria, Anicia Juliana, Khadija, Umm Salama, Raytah, and Arwa, and then discusses how Theodora and al-Khayzuran measured up to those ideals. In addition, this chapter explores how Theodora and al-Khayzuran acquired their wealth through their marriages to Justinian and al-Mahdi and how they utilized their wealth as imperial rulers by performing philanthropic acts, financing infrastructure improvements, and quelling political dissent. Chapter Four draws on Procopius’ *Secret History*, John Malalas’ *Chronicle*, Al-Tabari’s

History of Prophets and Kings, the Quran, Hadith, and the Justinianic Code. These sources provide information on how both Theodora and al-Khayzuran maintained their own economic agency as transacting bodies.

Both Theodora and al-Khayzuran were compared to previous “ideal models” by male writers in late antiquity, namely Procopius and al-Tabari. They were criticized primarily because they deviated from ideal models in that they were born into a low social status. Both began their lives as slaves. Despite their low social status, they were able to achieve upward mobility, eventually becoming imperial rulers. Both were accused of overstepping their position as imperial women by Procopius and al-Tabari, but the analysis shows that they commanded respect from their husbands and imperial courts and were able to wield considerable political and economic power. Theodora and al-Khayzuran came from humble origins but they understood the game of thrones and rose to prominent positions within their respective societies.

CHAPTER 2

FEMALE BODIES

Sixth-century Byzantine historian Procopius and ninth-century Abbasid historian al-Tabari praised and criticized Theodora and al-Khayzuran based on their roles as slaves, concubines, and rulers through their marriages and maternity. Both Theodora and al-Khayzuran were able to exercise varying degrees of political and economic power; both had less power and control when they were slaves and concubines and more as the wives and mothers of rulers, making them rulers in their own right. Theodora did not exercise political power as a concubine but she did later as an empress. Theodora did not exercise power as a queen regent because she did not outlive Justinian and she did not have a male heir.⁴⁴ In contrast, Al-Khayzuran was able to exert political and economic power and influence as the wife of al-Mahdi and even more as queen regent and the mother of two male heirs, al-Hadi and al-Rashid.

Female rulers, like Theodora and al-Khayzuran, were expected by their contemporaries and historians to be pious, maternal, and uninvolved in government affairs, much like Mary the mother of Jesus, the “Queen of Heaven,” who was the ideal female role model in both Christianity and Islam. Yet Mary represents the unattainable model of femininity, as she is revered for her virginity and fecundity in both Christianity and Islam. As it was impossible for both Theodora and al-Khayzuran to live up to these standards, they were compared by their historians to more practical ideals of femininity. Procopius’ ideal model in *Secret History* was Empress Domitia and Islamic historians like al-Tabari used both

⁴⁴ David Potter believes that Theodora had a daughter by Hecebolus and according to John Malalas she fostered young girls at the request of Justinian. Potter, “Theodora: Fantasy and Faction.”

Aisha and Fatima as ideal models of female behavior in the Abbasid caliphate. When Theodora and al-Khayzuran violated these expectations of appropriate female behavior, Procopius and al-Tabari reprimanded them by slandering their bodies. The lives of late antique female rulers Theodora and al-Khayzuran, as portrayed by male historians Procopius and al-Tabari respectively, provide parallels in regards to their rise to power, the expectations they were subject to, and their violation of these expectations.

Both Theodora and al-Khayzuran were daughters living a life of prostitution and slavery and both rose to power as consorts of Justinian and al-Mahdi, who would go on to rule the Byzantine and Abbasid empires respectively. While both women were mothers, only al-Khayzuran became the mother of future male rulers, al-Hadi and al-Rashid. Theodora and al-Khayzuran both shared a similar life trajectory as they rose to power and both were represented as deviating from ideal models of female rulers. Both women were maligned in the historical records of Procopius and al-Tabari for deviating from accepted feminine roles in their societies. Both Byzantine and Abbasid societies were powerful, expanding states led by young rulers, and while they were geographically and temporally distinct, they both reinforced acceptable gender roles through the ideal model of femininity: Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Theodora and al-Khayzuran's class statuses were elevated as a consequence of their relationships with their husbands. While these relationships shifted them economically from a non-dominant to a dominant group; this dominance and their consequent power was limited by their sex and gender status. In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Michel Foucault argues that "power exercised on the body is conceived not as property, but as a strategy ... [that] this power is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the 'privilege,' acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions---an effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated."⁴⁵ In other words, power is not a thing that can be possessed; it is a strategy that is exercised against

⁴⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 26-27. While *Discipline and Punish* was written about the French penal system, it is useful in understanding power dynamics, both today and in late antiquity.

bodies by the dominant classes. The dominant classes are able to wield power by virtue of their position in society and consequently are able to exercise power against non-dominant groups and individuals. Foucault also argued that “power is exercised from innumerable points” and is part of all relationships, including economic, epistemological, and sexual.⁴⁶ These relationships of power limited Theodora and al-Khayzuran to the roles of slave, concubine, and ruler through marriage and motherhood. The discourse of ideal “femininity” further limited the power of ruling women like Theodora and al-Khayzuran. Female roles were socially constructed in relation to male roles and were maintained by the dominant male hierarchy within their own time and place. When Theodora and al-Khayzuran transgressed from the acceptable ideal of femininity, and especially when they wielded their imperial power against men, they were reprimanded and disciplined by the male authors who wrote about them. The male authors reinforced their power by objectifying Theodora and al-Khayzuran when they did not follow the ideal model of femininity.

Femininity and masculinity are not biologically determined; neither are ideals universal or temporally fixed, although they bear some striking similarities in the case of Theodora and al-Khayzuran. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues that sex and gender are both socially constructed.⁴⁷ The similarities of ideal femininity in the sixth-century Byzantine Empire and in the ninth-century Abbasid caliphate are not a coincidence; rather they correlate to the similar nature of these societies, in particular their shared veneration of Mary and the use of Mary as the ideal feminine model for women. Butler argues that femininity and all gender identities are not nouns but rather verbs and, further, that genders are “performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence.”⁴⁸ Theodora and al-Khayzuran were expected by their male historians to perform the socially-

⁴⁶ Michel Foucault, *An Introduction*, vol. 1, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 94.

⁴⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 8.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

constructed and prescribed female roles of their respective societies; when their “performance” challenged acceptable notions of femininity Theodora and al-Khayzuran were reprimanded for their transgressions. According to Procopius, Theodora did not behave appropriately for an elite woman; in the same way al-Tabari recorded al-Hadi’s disciplining his mother al-Khayzuran for violating acceptable notions of femininity within the imperial court of the Abbasid caliphate.

Foucault and Butler’s scholarship concerning power and gender can be useful in discussing the roles that were available to female rulers in sixth-century Byzantium and the ninth-century Abbasid caliphate, and how women like Theodora and al-Khayzuran were able to exercise power within the narrowly defined roles available to them, including slave, concubine, and ruler. Theoretical models from Foucault and Butler will also be used to evaluate how the discourse on women’s bodies was socially constructed and how male authors used ideal models of femininity to reinforce acceptable behavior and to critique the “unacceptable” behavior of ruling women.

THE UNATTAINABLE MODEL OF FEMININITY

In order to place the accusations made against Theodora and al-Khayzuran into proper perspective, it is important to understand the virtues associated with elite women in both societies. In these societies, one understanding was that it meant performing the ideal virtues associated with Mary, the mother of Jesus, also known as the Virgin Mary. The life of Mary was recorded in both the Protoevangelium of James, a second-century, non-canonical Christian text, and in the Quran, with an entire Sura dedicated to Mary. In *Unrivalled Influence*, Judith Herrin argues that the virtue associated with Mary was unattainable for ordinary women.⁴⁹ Within both Christianity and Islam, Mary is praised and esteemed for her devotion to God, her perpetual virginity, and for her role as the mother of Jesus. There is one large difference in how followers of these religions regard Mary: in the Christian tradition

⁴⁹ Judith Herrin, *Unrivalled Influence: Women and Empire in Byzantium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 164, 169.

Mary is considered to be the Mother of God (Jesus who is also God in most Christian traditions) and consequently to be the Queen of Heaven, much in the way of a Queen Regent. Devotion to Mary increased after the 431 CE Council of Ephesus pronounced her to be the *Theotokos*, or bearer of God.⁵⁰

In Islam, Mary is revered not as the bearer of God but rather as the mother of a very important prophet, Jesus (Prophet Isa). In the Islamic tradition, Sura 19 in the Quran was named for Mary (Maryam), although only verses 16-40 actually discuss Mary and her son.⁵¹ Sura 19:20-21 describes the miraculous virgin birth of Jesus through the power of God.⁵² Sura 3:42-47 in the Quran also discusses Mary's sinless conception and the virgin birth of Jesus; more importantly, it references her piety and chastity.⁵³ Despite this key difference, Mary is revered in both religious traditions for her virginity, piety, chastity, and fecundity. In *Chosen Among Women*, Mary Thurlkill states that "Mary, the miraculous virgin, remains intact and uncorrupted while living a life of seclusion and charity in prelapsarian [innocent] flesh."⁵⁴ This ideal and unattainable "model" required women to be both chaste and fertile while living in seclusion. Thurlkill states that the Patristic Fathers "invoked the Virgin Mary as an image of orthodoxy; Mary's body displayed the church's purity and incorruptibility."⁵⁵ Within both religious traditions, Mary became the ideal and unattainable model for women to emulate.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 169.

⁵¹ Mary is a common ideal model for both Sunni and Shia Muslims. While Aisha is the ideal for Sunni Muslims and Fatima is the ideal for Shia Muslims, the majority of Muslims revere both women as a consequence of their relation to the prophet Muhammad.

⁵² *Qur'an* 19:20-21.

⁵³ Ibid., 3:42-47, 55-56.

⁵⁴ Mary F. Thurlkill, *Chosen among Women: Mary and Fatima in Medieval Christianity and Shi'ite Islam* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 64.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 11.

IDEAL MODELS OF FEMININITY

Along with Mary, the wives and daughters of the Prophet Muhammad served as models of femininity within Islamic societies, in particular Aisha and Fatima. Aisha, along with the Prophet's other wives, was called the "mother of believers," essentially an honorary title of motherhood over all Muslims. In the Quran, Sura 4 protects women's dowries and inheritance. The Quran protects orphaned women financially and physically. Married women are protected from marital rape and the Quran maintains that the husband must provide equal treatment to all of his wives. In *Women and Islam*, Fatima Mernissi states that the Sura's equal treatment of women in inheritance law violated pre-Islamic legal codes and customs.⁵⁶ Mernissi argues that "despite all those precautions and clarifications [in the Quran], men continued to try to suppress the egalitarian dimension of Islam...[as] they suddenly found themselves stripped of their most personal privileges."⁵⁷ After the death of the Prophet, these challenges to pre-Islamic law, culture, and the status of women, were negotiated by the early Muslim community.

The historical memory of Aisha reflected this new identity of femininity within the formation of Islam. Muslim women were taught to remain secluded in their houses, to fulfill acts of charity, piety, and obedience to God and to the Prophet's teachings.⁵⁸ Despite these new prescriptions regarding women in both the public and private sphere, Aisha became fully involved in the early politics of the Muslim community. Her father, Abu Bakr, became the first caliph and subsequent caliphs were criticized by Aisha. Aisha maintained her involvement due to her relationship to the Prophet and her father.⁵⁹ For Aisha, it was both the combination of having political prestige and being able to negotiate power from within the

⁵⁶ Fatima Mernissi, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 122-23.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 126.

⁵⁸ Barbara Freyer Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 102.

⁵⁹ Denise A. Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past: The Legacy of 'A'isha bint Abi Bakr* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 103.

women's space called the harem. It was both her association with the Prophet and her father that made her involvement in politics possible. In her role as the Prophet's wife and then widow, she challenged the misogynist Hadith attributed to Muhammad by his male companions,⁶⁰ she formed alliances with the Prophet's other wives, and she gathered and led a military force challenging Ali's leadership as caliph in what came to be known as the Battle of the Camel on account of Aisha's riding a camel into the battle.⁶¹ Aisha was kept from politics after losing this battle, the first Muslim civil war; however, the Muslim community continued to seek her out in order to preserve the deeds of the Prophet.⁶² Fourteenth-century Turkish Imam Zarkashi attributed 1,210 Hadith to Aisha; he collected her Hadith and the corrections and additions she made to Hadith recorded by the Prophet's male companions. Aisha was childless and widowed at eighteen, but she was venerated by many as the "Mother of the Believers...[and] the lover of the Messenger of God," and as an undisputed expert on the sayings of Muhammad, to which she contributed until her death at age sixty-five.⁶³ In *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past*, Denise Spellberg argues that Aisha was remembered for her role as wife and daughter, but not as a biological mother.⁶⁴ Aisha served as a model for female political participation and piety.

Fatima, whose mother was the Prophet's first wife Khadija, was the most beloved of the Prophet's daughters. Her prestige came from her marriage to Ali (the fourth and first disputed caliph) and from bearing two sons, Hasan and Husayn. Within the Shiite community she was revered as the ideal model of femininity, as she refrained from politics and provided the Prophet with two male grandchildren whom he cherished.⁶⁵ None of the Prophet's wives provided him with a male heir who survived childhood.⁶⁶ Her revered status is evident when

⁶⁰ Hadith literature are the recorded sayings and teachings of the Prophet by his followers.

⁶¹ Nabia Abbott, *Aisha: The Beloved of Mohammed* (New York: Arno, 1973), 70.

⁶² Denise Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past*, 3.

⁶³ Mernissi, *Women and Islam*, 77.

⁶⁴ Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past*, 4.

⁶⁵ Mernissi, *Women and Islam*, 108.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

one considers that the Prophet forbade his son-in-law Ali from having more than one wife, and doing otherwise would be considered an offense to both him and Fatima. Her status and role as an ideal model is also evident in that early Shiite historians and Hadith scholars compared her to Mary, the ultimate feminine ideal.⁶⁷ Some scholars argued that Fatima exceeded Mary (Maryam), calling her “*Maryam al-kubra*,” or “Mary the Greater.” Fatima was compared to Mary and thought to exceed her, not because she was a virgin, but due to belief in her divine state as a product of heaven and consequently her immunity to pollutants like blood, allowing Fatima constant contact with God.⁶⁸ Fatima was praised as the mother of the Shiite Imams and “shared the Imams’ privileged status and miraculous gifts; she, uniquely among women, remained ritually pure and inspired.”⁶⁹ Fatima served as a model of piety and motherhood, as she produced two male heirs, perpetuating the Prophet’s lineage.

Herrin argues that Mary represented “a transition from the pagan Old Rome to the Christian New Rome.”⁷⁰ In like manner, the veneration of Fatima was part of the theological separation between Sunni and Shiite communities. Mary was the foundational feminine model for Christianity and Islam; within Islam, however, Mary was supplanted by Fatima, and in some cases by Aisha, as the ideal feminine model. The principle models of female behavior within Islam were the Prophet’s wives and his daughter; there are no counterparts to the Prophet’s wives in the Christian tradition. Consequently, Christian female models for elite women were Mary, as previously discussed, and others.

In *Secret History*, Procopius compared Theodora to Domitia, a first-century Roman empress. Domitia personified the ideal model of femininity for Procopius; he described her as “a woman of good birth, and highly respected, who had herself never done the least wrong

⁶⁷ Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past*, 157, 159.

⁶⁸ Fatima’s soul is recorded as having originated from the fruit of a tree in heaven. Muhammad ate this fruit, which then turned into sperm, and eventually resulted in Fatima’s conception. At Fatima’s birth, her mother Khadija was assisted by four holy women from heaven, one of whom was Mary. Finally, Fatima’s birth was reported as being free from any contaminants like blood. Thurlkill, *Chosen among Women*, 59-60.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 5.

⁷⁰ Herrin, *Unrivalled Influence*, 169.

to any man alive.”⁷¹ Procopius argued that Theodora did not possess the three qualities of ideal, elite femininity that he attributed to Domitia.⁷² Domitia came from a prominent senatorial family, while Theodora came from a family of performers who were so poor that her mother had to sell her daughters into prostitution.⁷³ Theodora was not elite-born, she was not educated, and yet she wielded power over elite men. Conversely, Domitia came from a prestigious family, was educated, and more importantly, she did not participate in affairs of state or strip rank and wealth from men.⁷⁴

The ideal “models” of Domitia, Aisha, and Fatima, then, provided the more attainable foundation of expectations for female rulers as discussed by Procopius and al-Tabari, while Mary represented the unattainable model of ideal femininity. Both historians compared Theodora and al-Khayzuran to these ideals, either directly or indirectly, throughout the various stages of their lives. When they did not meet these ideal models their male authors criticized and censored their actions in relation to their male partners. Both Theodora and al-Khayzuran shared similar life trajectories: both were sold as sex slaves, both became the concubines of princes, and both were able to elevate their status to ruler through the roles of wife and mother.

THEODORA AND AL-KHAYZURAN AS SLAVES

Texts present both Theodora and al-Khayzuran as sexual objects and as slaves, placed into this position by their own family members; Theodora by her mother and al-Khayzuran

⁷¹ Procopius, *Secret History* 8.

⁷² Procopius was selective in his treatment of Domitia in that he failed to discuss certain aspects of Domitia’s behavior as recorded by second-century Roman biographer Suetonius, namely, her multiple husbands and lovers and her divorce. Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars* 12.1-3, 279-81. In *Great Women of Imperial Rome* historian Jasper Burns argues that Procopius’ *Secret History* was not a reliable source for the life of Domitia; he concludes that the image created by Procopius “tells us something of how Domitia was remembered” five hundred years after she reigned. Jasper Burns, *Great Women of Imperial Rome: Mothers and Wives of the Caesars* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 89.

⁷³ Ibid., 86.

⁷⁴ Domitia predated the Roman adoption of Christianity. Roman empresses who reigned after the fourth century were subject to Christian ideals of femininity; as previously discussed the ideal, and unattainable, model of Christian femininity was Mary, the mother of Jesus.

by slave traders, and possibly sold to them by her family.⁷⁵ Al-Tabari recorded minimal information about al-Khayzuran's youth and Procopius vilified Theodora in every stage of her life. Comparison of both women as daughters provides a fascinating understanding of society's expectations of ruling-class women; in this case, two women who climbed the social ladder from slaves to queens.

In *Secret History*, Procopius recorded his disgust regarding Theodora's low social upbringing in relation to her mother: "When the children were old enough, they were at once put on the stage there by [Theodora's] mother, as their appearance was very attractive."⁷⁶ Procopius never provided the name of the mother but did for her deceased father and step-father. She was described as a young girl who was too young to be working in the brothels but was able to satisfy her male customers, many of whom were slaves, in other ways.⁷⁷ Theodora and her two sisters were described as wearing wreaths on their heads while their mother displayed them as sex slaves before the circus factions; they were dressed in short tunics with long sleeves, which was similar to clothing worn by slaves.⁷⁸ Theodora was objectified and displayed; according to Procopius she was a sex slave whose patrons were the lowliest of men in society. Procopius is the only sixth-century writer who discusses Theodora's childhood in this manner. Most of the Syriac sources discussing Theodora focus on her role within the Monophysite church rather than on her earlier life; some, however, acknowledge her former profession as an actress and courtesan, both of which were essentially synonyms for prostitution. In *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, John of Ephesus, a contemporary of Theodora and a member of the Monophysite community, wrote that she was a courtesan who became a patrician and later a queen.⁷⁹ Regardless of their precise depictions

⁷⁵ Al-Khayzuran became enslaved in her youth and was purchased at a slave market for al-Mahdi by his father al-Mansur. It is uncertain how al-Khayzuran became enslaved, though she must have had a family so it is possible that she was sold into slavery by them.

⁷⁶ Procopius, *Secret History* 9.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints* 13.

of Theodora, Procopius and John of Ephesus both discuss Theodora relative to their own agendas.

Al-Tabari did not elaborate on the life of the young al-Khayzuran. Nabia Abbott's *Two Queens of Baghdad* provides the most information about al-Khayzuran's early life through translations and analysis of several Arabic-language primary sources that discussed the rise of al-Khayzuran from slave to concubine. Al-Khayzuran was the slave of an unnamed Thaqafi Arab who purchased her from the Yemen region and sold her to the ruling caliph al-Mansur for his son al-Mahdi during his pilgrimage to Mecca.⁸⁰ Abbott provided conflicting accounts; one stated al-Khayzuran was a Berber from North Africa while another stated she was a Greek from the city of Jerash.⁸¹ Al-Khayzuran's origin and ethnicity was important at the slave market in Mecca as slave women were characterized by the regions from which they came. The late seventh-century Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan stated that certain qualities valued in slave women were associated with their place of origin: Berbers for procreation, Greeks for their service, and Persians for their good behavior. Ibn Bultan went so far as to provide characteristics of slave women from various regions. Berber women were characterized for their dark complexions, faithfulness, obedience, and spirit. Yemeni women were characterized similarly to Berbers, with the addition of attractive faces. Finally, Byzantine women were characterized as being obedient and having straight blonde hair.⁸² Al-Khayzuran, much like Theodora, was marketed, displayed, and sold for her physical attributes. Khayzuran means "slender and graceful as a reed"; it is unknown if this was her birth name or a name given when she was a slave. Regardless, she is remembered in history by the physical description of her body.⁸³

⁸⁰ Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad*, 22.

⁸¹ Ibid., 26.

⁸² Matthew Caswell, *The Slave Girls of Baghdad: The Qiyān in the Early Abbasid Era* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 15.

⁸³ Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad*, 22.

Al-Mansur questioned the young al-Khayzuran about her living relatives to which she replied that she had none, although this was a lie.⁸⁴ His inquiry into the living relatives of al-Khayzuran served to protect his dynasty from her male relatives who could potentially threaten his dynastic hegemony. Al-Khayzuran was desired not only for her physical features but also due to her not having any familial ties. When she was eventually manumitted after giving birth to two male children, she confessed to al-Mahdi that she indeed did have a family who resided in Jerash.⁸⁵ Her life prior to becoming a slave is unknown; consequently her relationship with her parents can only be surmised. It is possible that she was sold by her family into slavery, either to generate income for the family, as a means of reducing the financial burden on the family, or to pay familial debts.

Comparing their roles as slaves provides an understanding of social expectations for non-elite women and the means through which they were able to elevate their status in late antiquity. Both societies valued appealing physical characteristics of women and both Theodora and al-Khayzuran were viewed as desirable objects. They were put on display for their male clientele and were able to use this object status to advance socially and economically through their relationships with elite men. Theodora's and al-Khayzuran's rise to power began when they became the concubines of not just elite men, but of men who were the heirs of their respective empires, Justinian of the Byzantine Empire and al-Mahdi of the Abbasid caliphate.

THEODORA AND AL-KHAYZURAN AS CONCUBINES

The private sphere of the women's quarters was socially and politically regulated by the male dominant hierarchy. Theodora and al-Khayzuran exerted power from within the women's quarters, called *gynaikonitis* in Byzantium and harem in the Abbasid caliphate. It is important to note that in many late antique societies, like those of Byzantium and the Abbasids, dwellings were separated into both a women's quarters and a men's quarters. The

⁸⁴ Ibid., 25-26

⁸⁵ Caswell, *The Slave Girls of Baghdad*, 18.

men's quarters included all of the public spaces of the house in addition to the sleeping and living areas used by the men, while the women's quarters consisted of the rooms in which women slept, lived, and ate. In Fatima Mernissi's 1998 book, *Forgotten Queens of Islam*, she describes the harem as a sacred space where women followed the acceptable roles as mother and lover.⁸⁶ The women's quarters was described as a private, sacred space, whereas the public space occupied by men was identified with war and was considered to be a profane space.⁸⁷ In large palaces such as those occupied by Justinian and al-Mahdi, the women's quarters would be extensive and occupied by numerous women, who were either staff or family relations; with that said it is important to dispel any stereotypical notions of women's quarters as either prisons or sex dungeons. Rather, they were homes within homes that were eventually controlled and run by al-Khayzuran and Theodora. The areas of the palace where visitors were received, where politics were to be conducted, and where the government was to be run, physically existed outside of the women's quarters and therefore were viewed as part of the men's quarters. Al-Khayzuran and Theodora first exercised power within the women's quarters as concubines and later outside of the women's quarters as rulers.

An important aspect of Theodora and al-Khayzuran's rise to power was their influence within the private sphere of the women's quarters. As concubines, Theodora and al-Khayzuran were expected to perform within the boundaries of their designated biological sex as objects of desire. Theodora's role as a concubine was to give her body for male amusement, as such she was not expected to have authority over men in general, especially not elite men. In the same way, al-Khayzuran was expected to entertain al-Mahdi, not to vie for political power within the harem. Al-Khayzuran, vying for political power, went beyond the expectations of a concubine from within the harem. Theodora and al-Khayzuran were limited in their roles as concubines; however, both cleverly maneuvered to advance their interests within the private sphere of the women's quarters.

⁸⁶ Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, 63.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 64.

Theodora, unlike al-Khayzuran, was the concubine of another man before she became the concubine of her eventual husband. Theodora was the concubine of an elite Tyrian man named Hecebolus.⁸⁸ According to Procopius, Hecebolus was appointed governor of the Pentapolis region in North Africa and there she served “him in the most revolting capacity, but she got into bad [favor] with him and was shot out without more ado.”⁸⁹ In other words, she was his concubine but then she fell out of favor with him; consequently her employment was terminated and their relationship ended. In *The Empress Theodora*, James Allen Evans suggests that Theodora was dismissed either because her reputation and prior occupation as an actress embarrassed Hecebolus or because she was not as subservient as he would have wished.⁹⁰ The historical record is silent on the interactions between Hecebolus and Theodora. In “Theodora,” Potter suggests that Theodora became pregnant with Hecebolus’ child and she was abandoned because she could no longer serve as a concubine for the new Libyan governor because of her pregnancy.⁹¹

Procopius was very critical of Theodora in her role of concubine because of her shifting social status, her influence on Justinian, and her involvement in politics. Theodora was viewed negatively by Procopius because she was a poor, plebian woman who became a wealthy patrician and because her status as Justinian’s concubine lent her more power than she had previously held; consequently she violated the elite, masculine position of power and authority. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues that the “masculine subject of desire,” in this case Theodora, becomes not only troublesome but scandalous when she exercises “unanticipated agency...[as she] returns the glance, reverses the gaze, and contests the place and authority of the masculine position.”⁹² Procopius accused Theodora of polluting the

⁸⁸ Procopius, *Secret History* 9.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Evans, *The Empress Theodora*, 16.

⁹¹ Potter, “Theodora: Fantasy and Faction.”

⁹² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, vii.

patrician rank as Justinian's concubine.⁹³ Theodora went from a plebian to the rank of patrician because of Justinian's "overwhelming passion for her."⁹⁴ Procopius accused Justinian of wasting the state's finances on Theodora, which included giving money to the Blue faction whom they both supported.⁹⁵ For Procopius, Theodora's relationship with Justinian destroyed the social fabric by removing the necessary and desired separation between the upper and lower classes. Justinian's aunt, Empress Euphemia, forbade the marriage between Justinian and Theodora. Nonetheless, when the empress died Justinian persuaded his uncle, the elderly Emperor Justin, to change the laws, which allowed Justinian to marry Theodora.⁹⁶ Procopius accused both Justinian and Theodora of abolishing fundamental Roman law concerning marriage that separated the upper classes from the lower classes. Procopius claimed that the new marriage law resulting from Justinian and Theodora's association allowed "everyone else to get engaged to a courtesan." Procopius' description of an ideal wife for Justinian was markedly different from Justinian's actual wife Theodora; he says that Justinian could have chosen, and infers that he should have chosen "the most nobly born woman in the world, who had enjoyed the most exclusive upbringing, and had lived in an atmosphere of chastity, and in addition was superbly beautiful and still a virgin."⁹⁷ Theodora only met one of Procopius' qualifications: she was very beautiful. Despite the limitations of her birth she was able to rise within Byzantine society using her beauty and intelligence, becoming first the concubine and then the wife of Justinian, the heir to the Byzantine Empire.

⁹³ Procopius, *Secret History*, 9.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ The Blue and Green factions were both professional chariot teams and political factions in Byzantium. Evans explains that these chariot teams gathered huge followings of spectators and they were responsible for producing theatrical productions, like the performances conducted by Theodora. The Blues supported Justinian while the Greens wanted to replace Justinian with the former emperor Anastasius' nephews. Evans, *The Empress Theodora*, 10.

⁹⁶ Procopius, *Secret History* 9.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 89.

Like Theodora, al-Khayzuran became first the concubine and then the wife of al-Mahdi, the heir to the Abbasid Empire. Al-Khayzuran used her position as a concubine within the imperial harem to develop power and influence; al-Khayzuran was successful, eventually becoming more powerful and influential than al-Mahdi's first wife Raytah. It is believed that al-Khayzuran became al-Mahdi's concubine in 758 CE, approximately three years before he married his cousin Raytah in 761 CE.⁹⁸ Raytah was the daughter of al-Mansur's brother al-Saffah, the first Abbasid caliph. Raytah was al-Mahdi's first wife, and his only wife, for almost fifteen years from 761-775/776 CE. She bore al-Mahdi two sons, Ubaidallah and Ali, though neither was his designated heir.⁹⁹ Al-Khayzuran bore al-Mahdi four children while she was his concubine, a daughter named al-Banuqah and three sons named al-Hadi, al-Rashid, and Isa.¹⁰⁰ Little is known of al-Banuqah and Isa except that al-Mahdi favored them, along with al-Hadi and al-Rashid, over his other children.¹⁰¹ It is possible that al-Khayzuran's two eldest sons were made heirs because they were older than Raytah's sons, because al-Khayzuran was favored over Raytah, or both. Despite her favored status, al-Khayzuran was al-Mahdi's concubine for approximately seventeen or eighteen years before she was manumitted and became his second wife sometime between 775 and 776 CE. Three events occurred during this two-year period: al-Mahdi became caliph, he

⁹⁸ Al-Masudi recorded that al-Mansur purchased al-Khayzuran for al-Mahdi; this is thought to have occurred during a trip al-Mansur took to Mecca in 758 CE. Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad*, 22-23.

⁹⁹ Isa ibn Musa was Al-Mahdi's cousin, the son of his uncle Musa, and heir to the Abbasid caliphate until al-Mahdi named his son (by al-Khayzuran) al-Hadi heir in 776 CE. Ibid., 25.

¹⁰⁰ According to al-Tabari, al-Khayzuran's daughter was called al-Banuqah and she travelled with her father al-Mahdi dressed as a young page boy in a black cloak with a sword attached to her hip to disguise her sex. Al-Tabari described her as "brown, of beautiful stature, and charming." The only other reference al-Tabari made to al-Banuqah was her untimely death in Baghdad and how al-Mahdi was inconsolable, showing "grief the like of which has never been heard of." Al-Tabari does not discuss the cause of death or her age at the time of her death, but we do know that she had reached puberty. Al-Tabari's account provides insight into the close relationship between al-Mahdi and al-Banuqah, which was the relative freedom that she enjoyed as his daughter and his willingness to let a female dear to him cross gender boundaries. Al-Tabari, *Al-Mansur and Al-Mahdi*, vol. 29, *The History of al-Tabari* 544, trans. Hugh Kennedy (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 263-64. Nabia Abbott claimed that there was not a lot of information about 'Isa in the historical record; only that a nearby town in the suburbs of Baghdad was named after him, 'Isabadh. Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad*, 31.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 31-33.

manumitted and married al-Khayzuran, and al-Hadi (approximately fifteen years old) was made heir to the Abbasid caliphate in place of al-Mahdi's cousin Isa ibn Musa. The long duration of her concubinage could have resulted from one or more of the following factors: because she was trained by Abbasid princesses like Zainab (granddaughter of the Prophet) in the duties of a caliph's wife, because al-Mansur did not want him to have other wives, or because al-Mahdi did not want to take additional wives until he was the caliph.

Despite the length of her concubinage or perhaps because of it, al-Khayzuran was able to acquire power and status as the favorite of al-Mahdi and she was able to maintain this position, in place of al-Mahdi's influential and respected wife, for over fifteen years. Raytah was al-Mahdi's wife during most of this period and she was trusted and respected by both al-Mansur and al-Mahdi; al-Mansur left the keys to the treasury in her possession when he went on pilgrimage to Mecca.¹⁰² Al-Khayzuran managed to live alongside Raytah in the harem, to maintain her position as al-Mahdi's favorite, and to maneuver her sons into positions of leadership above those of Raytah's sons. Her status as a concubine within the harem increased when she produced al-Mahdi's eldest sons, al-Hadi and al-Rashid. Despite the respect and prestige Raytah held as al-Mahdi's wife, al-Khayzuran's primary competition within the harem was not Raytah, but rather various singing girls as al-Mahdi loved music.¹⁰³ The accomplished singer Maknunah was purchased by al-Mahdi at a very high cost and she soon found herself in good favor with al-Mahdi; al-Khayzuran stated that "no other woman of his made my position so difficult."¹⁰⁴ Despite these challenges to her position, she was able to maintain her status as al-Mahdi's favorite for more than a decade and a half; the favored concubine became the favored wife and the mother of future caliphs.

Both al-Khayzuran and Theodora were concubines who used their beauty and intelligence to become the concubines of powerful men and the heirs to their respective

¹⁰² Al-Tabari, *Al-Mansur and Al-Mahdi*, 152.

¹⁰³ Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad*, 34-37.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 36.

empires. They both used their position as concubines to gain power and improve their social status, eventually becoming wives and rulers in their own right.

THEODORA AND AL-KHAYZURAN AS RULERS

Theodora and al-Khayzuran wielded power as rulers, in public and private, as the wives of Emperor Justinian and Caliph al-Mahdi respectively. The political power they wielded was predicated on that of their husbands; their role as wives allowed them to be rulers in their own right. In the case of al-Khayzuran, she derived her power to rule first through her role as the wife of al-Mahdi, and after his death as the mother of caliphs al-Hadi and al-Rashid. Theodora did not derive any power from motherhood as Justinian outlived her and she did not produce a male heir. Once al-Khayzuran and Theodora secured power and status by means of their husbands, and later al-Khayzuran through her sons, they were able to exercise authority over their subjects. Liz James, in her 2009 article, “Men, Women, and Eunuchs,” argues that “an empress’s official standing gave her power but her operation of the power was limited, again, by her sex. ‘Empress’ was a job for a woman but for a woman to do the job she was compelled to negotiate, not negate, her sex.”¹⁰⁵ Both Theodora and al-Khayzuran were able to negotiate the limited power available to them by their sex and gender and achieve political influence and power as rulers.

In her 2001 book *Empresses and Power in Early Byzantium*, Liz James discusses how Procopius used negative panegyric in his scathing portrayal of Theodora.¹⁰⁶ James argues that “the normal form of attack on women in Byzantium was the sexual; charging Theodora with sexual voracity, abortion, infanticide and the lack of maternal feelings are standard means of criticizing female behavior, of establishing a woman as unwomanly, and of Procopius expressing his unhappiness with a woman in power.”¹⁰⁷ Several examples are found in Procopius’ depiction of Theodora as a mother and grandmother. First, Theodora

¹⁰⁵ Liz James, “Men, Women, and Eunuchs: Gender, Sex, and Power,” in *A Social History of Byzantium*, ed. John Haldon (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 40-41.

¹⁰⁶ James, *Empresses and Power*, 16.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

died before she and Justinian had any children, meaning that Justinian died without a son to inherit the throne.¹⁰⁸ Theodora failed to produce a male heir, one of the primary tasks expected of female rulers. Procopius accused Theodora of having abortions frequently when she was an actress. He stated that she was unable to abort one such child, a son, whom she had out of wedlock. According to Procopius, the child's father named his son John and took him away for fear that Theodora would commit infanticide. After the boy's father died, John sought out his mother Theodora, who had him killed so Justinian would not learn of her illegitimate son.¹⁰⁹ According to Procopius, Theodora was neither a good mother nor a good grandmother;¹¹⁰ she wanted to marry her grandson Anastasius to Antonina's daughter Joannina in order to gain General Belisarius' wealth.¹¹¹ In order to achieve this end, Procopius stated that she forced the prepubescent girl and her grandson to have intercourse and live in an "unlawful union."¹¹² Procopius presented Theodora as a cold mother and a scheming grandmother, who used or did away with her children and grandchildren in order to secure power and wealth. Despite these negative characterizations, Theodora was able to successfully secure advantageous and prestigious alliances for her daughter, grandsons, her sister, and her niece.

Theodora, like al-Khayzuran, maneuvered her relatives into marriages with wealthy and prestigious families. Theodora arranged the marriage of her daughter, whose name is unknown, to a family member of the former emperor Anastasius; it has been suggested that she was married to Anastasius' brother Paul. This marriage aligned Theodora's daughter and her subsequent grandsons Anastasius, Athanasius, and John, with a prestigious and formerly imperial family. Theodora directly arranged the marriage of her grandson Anastasius to

¹⁰⁸ The Byzantine Empire was ruled by Justinian's nephew Justin II after his death in 565 CE.

¹⁰⁹ Procopius, *Secret History* 17.

¹¹⁰ Potter argues that Theodora's grandson, Anastasius, was from her daughter whom she had with Hecebolus. Procopius did not provide the name of Theodora's daughter or the father of Anastasius.

¹¹¹ Belisarius was one of Justinian's military generals and his military exploits were covered in Procopius' *Wars*. Antonina is Belisarius' wife and she is mostly discussed in *Secret History* as part of Procopius' invective against Theodora. Procopius, *Secret History* 5.

¹¹² Ibid.

Joannina, the daughter of Antonina and Belisarius. Another of her grandsons, Athanasius, became a church leader within the Monophysite community. Finally, her other grandson John was married to an elite patrician woman named Georgia; John himself was a patrician and served as an ambassador and consul. Theodora also arranged the marriage between her sister Comito and one of Justinian's trusted advisors, General Sittas.¹¹³ Comito's daughter, Sophia, was married to Justinian's nephew, the future emperor Justin II, and became an empress like Theodora. Theodora and al-Khayzuran elevated their family members through arranged marriages with prestigious and wealthy members in each of their societies. Theodora and al-Khayzuran arranged the marriages of their nieces, Sophia and Zubaidah respectively, to future rulers Justin II and al-Rashid thereby elevating their families into influential roles within the political bodies of the Byzantine and Abbasid imperial courts.¹¹⁴ Theodora's efforts to secure positions of prominence and power for her family were very successful, especially in the case of her niece, the future Empress Sophia. Despite these successes, Procopius depicted Theodora's political and marital maneuverings as manipulative and self-serving rather than securing the power and status of her family.

In *Secret History*, Procopius discussed Theodora's anti-maternal behavior as well as her general character and her behavior as the empress. Procopius portrayed Empress Theodora as "stubborn [and] self-will[ed]" and that she "fulfilled her own purposes with all the powers at her disposal, and nobody dared to ask mercy for anyone who had incurred her displeasure."¹¹⁵ Procopius accused Theodora of lazily sleeping all day long, taking excessive amounts of time bathing, and all the while she was running government affairs.¹¹⁶ Procopius found Theodora's dealings with male aristocrats to be offensive; for example, Empress

¹¹³ Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century*, 80-81.

¹¹⁴ John of Ephesus stated that Sophia managed the Byzantine government as her husband Justin II reportedly suffered from mental illness. She (unsuccessfully) attempted to maintain her position as Augusta after Justin II's death in 578 CE by marrying his predecessor Tiberius. John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History* III.10.

¹¹⁵ Procopius, *Secret History* 15.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

Theodora kept magistrates seeking her council outside her *gynaikonitis* “await[ing] her pleasure, waiting like slaves in a stuffy anteroom all the time.”¹¹⁷ Procopius further stated that “when [a certain male] patrician was admitted to the women’s quarters, he prostrated himself in the ways she always insisted on.”¹¹⁸ Regarding real estate property of patricians, Procopius criticized Theodora for “[fabricating] charges which had nothing to do with the accused,”¹¹⁹ that she took property away from those who had offended her, and that she had the accused whipped without mercy despite their noble status.¹²⁰ He goes on to describe Theodora as a tyrannical master enslaving the entire empire for her own pleasure and amusement.¹²¹ In *Empresses and Power*, Liz James states that the invective created by Procopius in *Secret History* illustrated the acceptable and unacceptable behavior of Byzantine women, specifically “empresses, who were women operating in the public domain, outside of what was considered a woman’s proper place.”¹²² For Procopius, Theodora violated every acceptable behavior for an empress, from her low-born status to her involvement in government affairs to her mistreatment of male aristocrats. Consequently, he depicted Theodora as a corrupt and unjust ruler; a bad mother and grandmother; and as a strong-willed, stubborn, vain, and self-important woman.

In late antiquity, women who were accused of witchcraft could be characterized similarly to Theodora, as beautiful, stubborn, and strong-willed.¹²³ Procopius indirectly accused Theodora of practicing magic as her means of power over men. Procopius described the “magical” powers Theodora and Antonina exerted over men; in the same way the women in Apuleius’ *Golden Ass* (also called *Metamorphoses*) used their sexual magic as a means to

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² James, *Empresses and Power*, 19.

¹²³ Elizabeth Ann Pollard, “Magic Accusations against Women in the Greco-Roman World from the First through the Fifth Centuries C.E.” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2001), 32-85.

control men. Liz James states that “[the] reverse of the pious empress was the impious and ungodly witch, in league with the powers of evil and the devil.”¹²⁴ Procopius drew on these female archetypes in his descriptions of both Theodora and Antonina; the archetypes in this second-century novel were well known among the sixth-century elite.¹²⁵ These archetypes created by male writers rationalized the behavior of powerful women and women who did not conform to societal expectations of their gender, by associating them with witchcraft and sexual magic. Apuleius’ story of the miller’s wife shared similarities with the characteristics Procopius used to describe Theodora. The miller’s wife was described as a horrible woman with evil flowing through her soul; she was

mean and malicious, drunk on dalliance, wildly willful, as grasping in her petty thefts as wasteful in her mad extravagance, inimical to loyalty and an enemy to chastity... [and she invented] fantastic rites to mislead everyone and deceive her poor husband, that excused her tippling wine from dawn and playing the whore all day.¹²⁶

In *The Metamorphoses of Apuleius*, Carl C. Schlam states that “men in these stories, both husbands and lovers, are often, as in the earlier tales of witchcraft, victims.”¹²⁷ The victims in *Secret History*, from Procopius’ point of view, were themselves wealthy aristocratic men who found ill favor with Theodora and lost either their fortune or social status in Byzantium and in some cases their very lives. In the same way, Apuleius described Lucius’ friend Socrates who lost his fortune and status to the witch Meroe. Apuleius through Socrates warns Lucius to “beware of a woman with magic powers . . .”¹²⁸

¹²⁴ James, *Empresses and Power*, 16.

¹²⁵ Apuleius’ *The Golden Ass* (*Metamorphoses*), written in the second-century Roman Empire, celebrated the struggle of the male protagonist Lucius whose curiosity about magic results in him being turned into an ass. Before being transformed back into human form by the goddess Isis, Lucius meets various persons along his journey; of particular interest were several women who practiced magic: Fotis, Meroe, and the miller’s wife. Lucius Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*.

¹²⁶ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass* Book IX: The Miller’s Wife, 14-16.

¹²⁷ Carl C. Schlam, *The Metamorphoses of Apuleius: On Making an Ass of Oneself* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 76.

¹²⁸ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass* Book I: Socrates’ Misfortune, 6-10.

Both Procopius and Apuleius described how women used magical powers to take social status and wealth from prominent male aristocrats, essentially enslaving their victims through their magical powers. Apuleius described how Lucius was “a slave, and a willing one” to the sexual energy of Fotis. Procopius implied that Theodora was a witch by using the aforementioned characterization of witches. Procopius also implied that she was a witch through her association with Antonina, whom he directly accused of witchcraft. Procopius used Antonina in *Secret History* to illustrate the archetypical “witch” who enslaved men through sexual desire much like women in *The Golden Ass*.

In *Secret History*, Procopius accused Antonina of practicing magic, which she allegedly had learned from her father. She was also accused of being unfaithful to her husband Belisarius from the start of their marriage. The use of magic allowed her to “twist her husband round her little finger.”¹²⁹ Procopius stated that Antonina needed to be in close proximity to Belisarius in order for the magic to work and she made sure that she was always near him to prevent him from coming to his senses.¹³⁰ According to Procopius, Belisarius was a “slave of her lust” while Antonina was “malignant as a scorpion and an expert at concealing her feelings.”¹³¹ Procopius accused Antonina of stepping outside her appropriate role as a noble woman and wife as she used magic to control her husband Belisarius.¹³² Procopius does not hold back, stating “Rumor has it also that his wife used magic arts to enslave him, instantly destroying his resolution.”¹³³ Procopius views Antonina’s perceived control over her husband in an excessively negative manner, primarily because she is a woman. He also argued that the only way an older woman, who by implication is less attractive than a younger woman, could control a man, is through magic.

¹²⁹ Procopius, *Secret History* 1.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid., 42-43.

¹³² Pollard, “Magic Accusations,” 17-18.

¹³³ Procopius, *Secret History* 3.

Immediately following his statements about Antonina's enslavement of her husband through magic, Procopius discussed Theodora and Antonina's close relationship and criticized their collusion to seize, torture, and murder high-ranking men whom Theodora viewed as a threat.¹³⁴ One of these men was John of Cappadocia, a praetorian prefect.¹³⁵ Procopius discussed John of Cappadocia in both *Wars* and *Secret History*, demonstrating his concern at her involvement and his notions of acceptable and unacceptable behavior for imperial women. Procopius criticized Theodora for her role in the downfall of elite men and government affairs; in *Secret History*, Theodora was said to have taken "control of every branch of public affairs according to her own personal ideas."¹³⁶ In the case of John of Cappadocia, Procopius stated that Theodora had been slandered by him, but she did not take direct action against him because he was favored by Justinian.¹³⁷ Consequently, Antonina devised a plan that implicated John of Cappadocia in plotting a rebellion against the crown; when Justinian found out, John was arrested for sedition and stripped of his title and property.¹³⁸ As punishment, John was made a presbyter of the Orthodox Church and soon after was accused of murdering Bishop Eusebius of Cyzicus, which led to his incarceration and flogging.¹³⁹ In *Secret History*, Procopius argued that the incident concerning John of Cappadocia occurred because Theodora was angry with him and that he was not actually guilty of sedition.¹⁴⁰ Procopius went on to applaud John of Cappadocia for "standing up to her [Theodora] in one matter after another."¹⁴¹ The actions of Theodora and Antonina showed how influential these women were in government affairs. Theodora picked members she liked for government appointments, which lessened chances of rebellion and

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Procopius, *History of the Wars*, 59.

¹³⁶ Procopius, *Secret History* 17.

¹³⁷ Procopius, *History of the Wars*, 65.

¹³⁸ Ibid., I.1.25:10-42, 66-69.

¹³⁹ Ibid., I.1.25:35-44, 68-69.

¹⁴⁰ Procopius, *Secret History* 17.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

consolidated her own power and authority within the empire. Yet imperial women were not expected to be involved in political affairs and when they did they were reprimanded in the historical record.

In *Secret History*, Procopius criticized Theodora not just for her role in politics and government but for her and Justinian's abuse of their authority and power. Procopius described them as deceitful and manipulative and accused them of pitting various groups against each other for their own amusement, including the Orthodox and Monophysite Christians, the circus factions, and their close friends.¹⁴² Procopius accused them both of stealing from their subjects, including property from senators.¹⁴³ According to Procopius, Theodora and Justinian "were a pair of blood-thirsty demons" who plotted the destruction of humanity for their own amusement and financial gain.¹⁴⁴ Just as Procopius accused both Theodora and Antonina of stepping out of their acceptable roles as women, he also accused Theodora and Justinian of abusing their political power. Frustration with the monarchy resulted in a public riot in the capital city of Constantinople in the year 532 CE.

The Nika Revolt occurred in 532 CE. It began with rioters from the Green and Blue factions at the Hippodrome who grew angry with Justinian for having ignored their cries for the release for their imprisoned members. In *Wars*, Procopius recorded the speech Theodora gave during the riot as Justinian and the rest of the imperial court were about to flee the city:

The Empress Theodora said: As to whether it is unseemly for a woman to be bold among men, or to be daring when others are full of fear, I do not think that the present crisis allows us to consider the matter. For in extreme danger the only vital thing is to deal with the situation in the best way. For my part, I consider that now of all times flight would be bad, even if it brings safety. Once a man is born he cannot escape dying, but for one who has held the imperial power it would be unbearable to become a fugitive. May I never be parted from this purple, and may I never live to see the day when men who meet me will not address me as their sovereign. If you wish to be saved, Emperor, that is not difficult. We have great resources of wealth; there is the sea, here are the boats. But take care lest when

¹⁴² Ibid., 10, 91-92.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 11, 99.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 12, 102.

you have saved yourself you wish that you could have death instead of your safety. I agree with the old saying, “Royalty is a good winding sheet.” At these words from the Empress they were all inspired with courage and began to debate how they could defend themselves if anyone attacked them.¹⁴⁵

Most scholars agree that Procopius invented this speech, yet it does reveal Procopius’ attitude concerning Theodora’s behavior and her desire for power. Theodora’s speech reflected her willingness to challenge Justinian publicly, to involve herself in politics, to act as a leader of men, and it insinuated that she was braver than her husband.¹⁴⁶ Despite the relatively positive nature of this report, it is believed by scholars that Procopius ended her speech with a purposeful and negative misquote conflating royalty and tyranny and implying that her and Justinian’s leadership was tyrannical. He ends her speech with the “old saying” that “royalty is a good winding sheet,” while the correct saying was “tyranny is a good winding sheet,” meaning that being a tyrant is a “good death shroud” or way of getting oneself killed. Procopius’ contemporaries would have been familiar with this saying, from first-century BCE Greek historian Diodorus Siculus’ *Bibliotheca historica*; they also would have understood the purposeful misquote and the implied insult.¹⁴⁷ This speech demonstrated Procopius’ view of Theodora’s active involvement within the masculine domain of politics and government and her and Justinian’s leadership.

The sixth-century Roman law code known as the Justinianic Code reflected Theodora’s influence in improving the status of women, in particular, prostitutes. In *The Empress Theodora*, James Evans discusses how Theodora wanted to protect women from the same misfortune she faced as a young girl forced into prostitution.¹⁴⁸ Both Justinian and Theodora created shelters throughout Constantinople to assist former prostitutes. Yet Procopius mocked their efforts stating that “some of [the prostitutes] from time to time threw themselves down from the parapet during the night, and so escaped being transmogrified

¹⁴⁵ Procopius, *History of the Wars*, 62.

¹⁴⁶ All criticisms of Theodora are by extension critiques of Justinian, who is characterized by Procopius as weaker, less brave, and under the control of Theodora.

¹⁴⁷ Evans, *The Age of Justinian*, 124.

¹⁴⁸ Evans, *The Empress Theodora*, 30-31.

against their will,” implying that they were being held in these shelters and “reformed” against their will.¹⁴⁹ Procopius also criticized the updated legal code created by Justinian that allowed women to initiate divorce proceedings, stating that as a result “all women had become morally depraved. For they could play false to their husbands with complete impunity, since such behavior involved them in no danger or harm.”¹⁵⁰ Procopius went on to say that husbands who accused their wives of adultery were brought before the empress who forced them to pay double the amount of dowry to their wives and then had them “scourged and led away to prison.”¹⁵¹ Essentially Procopius viewed these laws that empowered women, and Theodora’s role in passing them, as undermining the *patria potestas*, or rule by the father, upon which Byzantine, and earlier Roman, society rested.

Al-Khayzuran, much like Theodora, maintained power in relation to her husband al-Mahdi. Al-Khayzuran became the legal wife of al-Mahdi after she bore him two male heirs and after he became caliph. Producing children, and in particular a male heir, was expected of both Theodora and al-Khayzuran. Al-Khayzuran was successful where Theodora was not; she produced four children for her husband al-Mahdi, two of whom became caliphs. As previously stated, the historical record concerning the power and influence of al-Khayzuran during the reign of her husband al-Mahdi is limited. Nabia Abbott argues that al-Khayzuran’s political influence was known to eighth-century historians, but they only discussed a woman’s influence in politics when she clashed with elite men. Consequently, much of the information concerning al-Khayzuran’s power and influence was discussed within the context of the power struggle between herself and her son al-Hadi. Despite these limitations we know that al-Khayzuran, through her husband al-Mahdi, returned Yahya to his government post as vizier and appointed the prominent judge Sharik to tutor their sons.¹⁵² Through her position as al-Mahdi’s wife, al-Khayzuran was able to make government

¹⁴⁹ Procopius, *Secret History* 17.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad*, 55.

appointments, and within the harem she ruled without assistance or oversight from al-Mahdi. After al-Mahdi's untimely death, her power came from her role as queen mother to her two sons and future caliphs, al-Hadi and al-Rashid, and her own political savvy.

Within the harem al-Khayzuran was a political maneuverer and matchmaker. As previously discussed, after the birth of al-Rashid, al-Khayzuran revealed to al-Mahdi that she had a family who lived in the Yemeni region. Abbott stated that it "was not until after the birth of her two sons...that Khaizuran informed Mahdi of her family---a mother, two sisters, and at least one brother---who were still at Jurash [in the Yemini region]."¹⁵³ Al-Khayzuran managed to advance her brother Ghitrif to a political appointment as the governor of Yemen after the death of al-Mansur. She also arranged a marriage between her older sister Salsal and Jafar, al-Mahdi's half-brother.¹⁵⁴ These events occurred while al-Khayzuran was still a concubine and resulted from her political maneuvering within the harem, as she ensured the future welfare of her family and her sons through their membership in the royal bloodline of the caliphate. In 767 CE, al-Khayzuran's niece Zubaidah was born to her sister Salsal and Jafar; later al-Khayzuran arranged the betrothal of Zubaidah and her son al-Rashid. Likewise, al-Khayzuran arranged for her son al-Hadi to marry her niece Ubaidah, the daughter of her brother Ghitrif, and make her his second wife.¹⁵⁵ Al-Khayzuran also managed to make two of her nieces her daughters-in-law, positioning her family to produce possible heirs to the Abbasid caliphate. She formed political alliances from within the harem that proved to be quite successful, as she promoted her family into prominent marriage alliances, which ensured the legitimacy of her two sons' claims to the caliphate but also reinforced her political power within the harem.¹⁵⁶

Al-Khayzuran faced political hostility when al-Mahdi died in 785 CE. In *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World*, Hugh Kennedy states that at al-Mahdi's death, troops

¹⁵³ Ibid., 29.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 29-30.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 68.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

rioted in the capital city of Baghdad. Both al-Hadi and al-Rashid were away, so al-Khayzuran called on two chief advisors, Rabi and Yahya, to help pacify the rioters.¹⁵⁷ Through her quick action, al-Khayzuran prevented further damage from the rioters by providing them with two years' salary in advance and more importantly she maintained her position of power from within the palace. Both Theodora and al-Khayzuran successfully quelled rioters in their respective imperial capitals and it was their quick action that not only ended the riots but also maintained their political position as imperial rulers. Kennedy states that despite al-Khayzuran's prevention of the military coup, tensions grew afterward between both al-Khayzuran and al-Hadi as she wanted to maintain a public presence against her son's own wishes.¹⁵⁸

Despite the historical silence concerning al-Khayzuran's leadership during her husband al-Mahdi's lifetime, al-Tabari briefly discussed her authority during the reign of her eldest son al-Hadi. From the very beginning of al-Hadi's reign as caliph, al-Khayzuran continued to exercise her authority from within the imperial palace just as she had done during the reign of her husband.¹⁵⁹ Al-Tabari recorded that "[during al-Hadi's] caliphate, al-Khayzuran [frequently bombarded] him with requests for favors, and he used to grant whatever she asked. This went on for four months of his caliphate, and people thronged round her, seeking her aid, and processions of people used to resort to her door."¹⁶⁰ Al-Tabari recorded how she continued to express her "authority over him in all his affairs without consulting him at all, and she used to behave in regard to him, by assuming sole control over matters of ordaining and forbidding."¹⁶¹ In *Forgotten Queens of Islam*, Mernissi states that "Yemeni women are known for never agreeing to leave men in sole charge of politics,"¹⁶²

¹⁵⁷ Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World*, 184.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Al-Tabari, *The Abbasid Caliphate in Equilibrium*, 569.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 569-570, 42-43.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 569, 42.

¹⁶² Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, 52.

which according to the author reflected al-Khayzuran's political involvement. Al-Tabari recorded that al-Khayzuran continued to wield power over government affairs during the initial reign of al-Hadi.¹⁶³ Al-Tabari did not specify the extent of her influence in politics; but a poem by Abu al-Maafi, recorded in a tenth-century history of the Abbasids called *Meadows of Gold*, indicated her involvement in state affairs. A verse reads: "Gently now, Khaizuran! Stop and let your sons govern their subjects."¹⁶⁴ Eventually, al-Hadi reproached his mother and took control over the government.

Al-Hadi was not a popular ruler within the Abbasid caliphate. In *The Caliph's Splendor*, Benson Bobrick asserts that al-Hadi persecuted heretics like the *zandiks*, who were members of a Manichaean sect, that he sent an army to eradicate Shiites and had the great-grandson of Ali killed near Mecca in 786 CE, and that he unremorsefully decapitated two slave girls who were caught having sex with each other.¹⁶⁵ In addition to these actions, Abbott discusses how al-Hadi suffered from a physical handicap, possibly a cleft lip, and that the likelihood of constant teasing led to his intolerance and brutality.¹⁶⁶ The poet Bashar ibn Burd (714-783 CE) mocked al-Mahdi for sleeping with his aunts and playing with children's toys and in a subtle way conveyed contempt against al-Hadi by wishing for him to return into al-Khayzuran's womb:

The Caliph [al-Madhi] whores with his paternal aunts,
Plays equally with childish games and scepters.
God grant us soon another in his place,
And stuff Musa [al-Hadi] back up Khayzuran's pants.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶³ Al-Tabari, *The Abbasid Caliphate in Equilibrium*, 42.

¹⁶⁴ Al-Masudi, *The Meadows of Gold* 6.268-70.

¹⁶⁵ Bobrick, *The Caliph's Splendor*, 28-29.

¹⁶⁶ Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad*, 61-62.

¹⁶⁷ Al-Tabari, *The Son and Grandsons of al-Manṣūr, the Reigns of al-Mahdī, al-Hādī, and Hārūn al-Rashīd*, vol. 2 of *The Early 'Abbāsī Empire* 538, trans. John Alden Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 131.

The poet ibn Burd was eventually executed by the caliph. Ibn Burd represented the closest contemporary writer, like Theodora's Procopius, to slander both al-Khayzuran and al-Mahdi. Ibn Burd's death cut short his political commentary, but al-Tabari recorded the later conflict between the queen regent al-Khayzuran and her son caliph al-Hadi because of her intruding into public affairs.

Al-Hadi chastised his mother al-Khayzuran for her involvement in politics and for making government appointments without his approval; her active participation in court politics created tension between mother and son and al-Tabari recorded the conflict between al-Hadi with his mother. Al-Khayzuran requested that her son fulfill a government appointment she had already promised prior to asking him. Al-Hadi responded that he would not honor her request and swore "that if I ever hear about any of my commanders or any of my close courtiers or servants standing at your door, I shall certainly have their heads chopped off and their possessions confiscated."¹⁶⁸ Al-Hadi further insulted his mother by commanding her to keep herself busy within the harem by weaving clothes or reading the Quran.¹⁶⁹ Al-Tabari also recorded a possible poisoning attempt perpetrated by al-Hadi who was thought to have attempted to murder his mother; the plot was foiled by one of her servants who fed the poisoned food to a dog. When al-Hadi found out his mother was still alive he asked: "[When] was any Caliph ever happy who had a mother (still alive)?"¹⁷⁰ Al-Tabari reported that from that moment forth, al-Khayzuran did not speak to her son or leave the harem until his death later that year.¹⁷¹

Al-Tabari provided two explanations for the untimely death of the young al-Hadi, who only ruled as caliph for a little over a year. Either it was the result of an ulcer or it came at the hands of one or more of al-Khayzuran's harem slave girls, who were thought to have

¹⁶⁸ Al-Tabari, *The Abbasid Caliphate in Equilibrium*.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Al-Tabari, *The Abbasid Caliphate in Equilibrium*, 570.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 571.

suffocated him.¹⁷² Modern scholars cannot know how al-Hadi died. What modern interpreters do know is that al-Khayzuran had motive to murder her son. Al-Hadi was attempting to make his young son Jafar next in line for the caliphate, usurping al-Rashid's position as heir.¹⁷³ This change in succession ran counter to al-Mahdi's wishes and placed al-Rashid's life in jeopardy as he was an adult and a potential threat to the young Jafar's position. The threat was evident in that al-Hadi imprisoned the vizier Yahya because of his close relationship with al-Rashid.¹⁷⁴ In addition to these issues of succession, al-Hadi had humiliated al-Khayzuran, ordering her to stay away from government affairs and threatening officials from seeking her council, and worst of all, attempting to end her life. Al-Khayzuran was shamed and threatened under the reign over her first-born son al-Hadi but she wielded power and influence under the reign of her second-born son, al-Rashid.

Al-Khayzuran triumphantly returned to the political sphere at the ascension of her second son al-Rashid. After al-Rashid took command as caliph, he released Yahya from prison and appointed him as his vizier and stated: "I have invested in you with responsibility for the subjects' affairs and have transferred the burden from myself to you."¹⁷⁵ Al-Rashid gave his seal ring to Yahya and allowed him to manage the Abbasid caliphate. Yet al-Tabari recorded that "[al-Khayzuran] was the one who had the oversight of affairs; Yahya used to lay matters before her and do things on her advice."¹⁷⁶ In *The Caliph's Splendor*, Bobrick states that al-Khayzuran wanted to execute members who supported al-Hadi's son Jafar's claim for the caliphate; instead, Yahya insisted on sparing their lives and gave them "risky frontier assignments."¹⁷⁷ Al-Khayzuran returned to the political sphere, mediating between the sacred space of the harem and the profane space of the imperial court.

¹⁷² Ibid., 569.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 571.

¹⁷⁴ Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World*, 185.

¹⁷⁵ Al-Tabari, *The Abbasid Caliphate in Equilibrium*, 98.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Bobrick, *The Caliph's Splendor*, 37.

The extent of al-Khayzuran's influence in the political sphere, though not recorded, can be seen at her funeral in 789 CE. Al-Rashid led the funeral procession barefoot and in humble attire. After placing her body in the tomb, al-Rashid recited the eulogy Aisha said for her father Abu Bakr at his funeral.¹⁷⁸ Yet al-Rashid's first order after the funeral was to negate and disregard her wishes regarding political appointments.¹⁷⁹ Al-Tabari recorded al-Rashid's frustration and relief at his mother's tomb when he appointed Fadl as his new vizier against his mother's wishes,

For some time now, I have been intending to confer on you [Fadl] some administrative charge or similar responsibility, but my mother [al-Khayzuran] has (hitherto) been restraining me and I have accordingly been obedient to her command; but now, take over the seal ring from Ja'far [the son of Yahya my previous vizier].¹⁸⁰

Despite not following al-Khayzuran's wishes for political appointments, he respected her enough to do it after she passed away, unlike his brother al-Hadi, who completely disregarded al-Khayzuran's political ambitions. Perhaps al-Rashid feared his mother and did not want the same fate as his deceased brother. In any case, al-Khayzuran triumphed during the reign of her son al-Rashid, as she reestablished her power within the imperial court.

The most successful of al-Khayzuran's political alliances was Zubaidah's marriage to al-Rashid. Al-Khayzuran mentored and groomed the young Zubaidah within the harem. Zubaidah, much like al-Khayzuran, eventually managed the harem as the principle wife and provided a male heir, al-Amin. According to Abbott, Zubaidah maintained her power and influence within the harem, which she shared with al-Rashid's other wives, concubines, and slaves. An example of how she might have maintained her power within the harem can be found in "*The Tale of Scheherazade*;" in it the main narrator Queen Scheherazade, who may have been modeled after Zubaidah, continued to visit the character who represented al-

¹⁷⁸ While this was a eulogy written by a child for their parent, it was originally written by a daughter for her father. It was an interesting choice of eulogies for al-Rashid to recite on his mother's death due to the gender inversion of child and parent and because al-Rashid thought that the eulogy of Abu Bakr, an influential and powerful political leader, related to al-Khayzuran.

¹⁷⁹ Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad*, 126.

¹⁸⁰ Al-Tabari, *The Abbasid Caliphate in Equilibrium*, 107.

Rashid in his private chamber as she kept his interest with extraordinary tales of heroism.¹⁸¹ Zubaidah appeared to enjoy a more lavish lifestyle than her mother-in-law al-Khayzuran, as talented poets and singers frequented the harem. Yet this does not mean she was not interested in the politics of the caliphate. Zubaidah had agents who maintained her best interests and secretaries who managed her personal estates.¹⁸² She was even so bold as to require emissaries to kiss the hand of her pet monkey until a military general in al-Rashid's army took offense and cut her monkey in half.¹⁸³ In the public sphere she was able to maintain her influence through acts of philanthropy and having produced a male heir to the caliphate.

Al-Khayzuran's mentoring of Zubaidah ensured her daughter-in-law's success and her legacy through her son al-Amin. Nonetheless, in 813 CE Zubaidah and the Abbasid caliphate faced a civil war of succession when her son al-Amin changed the order of succession from his step-brother al-Mamun to his young son Musa ibn al-Amin, contrary to the wishes of the deceased al-Rashid. Zubaidah did not support her son's efforts to change the order of succession, which resulted in a civil war. According to Abbott, Zubaidah pleaded to al-Amin to reverse his decision but her son responded: "'Silence! Crowns are not to be firmly secured through women's frets and fears. The caliphate demands statesmanship beyond the ability of women, whose function is to nurse children. Away! Be gone!'"¹⁸⁴ Eventually al-Amin went into hiding in Zubaidah's quarters but this stratagem proved unsuccessful as in the same year his body was found on the river bed and his decapitated head was sent to al-Mamun. Zubaidah did not follow in the footsteps of Aisha with a call to avenge the death of her son. Instead she ordered that there would not be any fighting to avenge her son's death, asking: "[Is] it fitting then that women should demand the price of

¹⁸¹ "The Tale of Scheherazade" in *Tales from the Arabian Nights*, trans. Richard Francis Burton (New York: Fall River Press, 2012), 1-20.

¹⁸² Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad*, 163.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 168.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 218.

blood and take the place of warriors?"¹⁸⁵ She acknowledged her step-son al-Mamun as the rightful caliph, thus ensuring her life and retirement within the harem. Zubaidah, much like al-Khayzuran, maintained her political influence from within the harem, produced at least one male heir, and was chastised by her son for involving herself in political affairs.

Al-Khayzuran and Theodora established their power from within the imperial palace in relation to their male partners. Theodora maintained her political influence in relation to Justinian and despite not producing a male heir, she like al-Khayzuran, made marriage alliances that best suited her political agenda. Al-Khayzuran, much like Theodora, was expected to be meek and to stay within the women's quarters, and they were both reproached in the historical accounts when they transcended into the male domain of the imperial court. Theodora and al-Khayzuran influenced and trained their successors, Sophia and Zubaidah respectively. Both female rulers were viewed as transgressors and did not meet the expectations of the ideal female ruler according to their critics.

THEODORA, AL-KHAYZURAN, AND THE IDEAL MODEL

Theodora and al-Khayzuran did not meet the expectations of the ideal model according to the male historians in their society. When analyzing the various roles of Theodora and al-Khayzuran as slaves, concubines, and rulers, we saw how each role related to that ideal model. When they did not perform to those expectations they were reprimanded and reminded of their status in society by the male authors who wrote about them. Performance was regulated by the male dominant hierarchy, which reinforced acceptable biological sex roles with their respected communities. The ideal model reinforced and regulated appropriate biological sex roles for women in each society.

Theodora and al-Khayzuran deviated from the ideal model described earlier. Their deviation challenged the patriarchal power structure of the ruling classes. *Secret History* functioned as an outlet for Procopius to express his contempt for Theodora who broke the ideal understanding of femininity and against Justinian for being inept in controlling

¹⁸⁵ Al-Masudi, *The Meadows of Gold* 6.484-87.

Theodora. In a similar fashion, the poet Abu al-Maafi expressed his indignation of al-Khayzuran's role in government affairs in the same way al-Hadi reproached al-Khayzuran for not performing to the ideal model of femininity.

The unattainable model of the Virgin Mary was not achieved by either Theodora or al-Khayzuran. Procopius reminded the readers that Theodora's previous lifestyle as an actress violated that chaste and meek ideal model associated with the Virgin Mary. Far from the life-giving *theotokos*, Theodora arranged the death of her own son. Whereas al-Khayzuran provided two male heirs for the caliphate, her association in the death of her own son separated her actions as a caring mother that was associated with the Virgin Mary. Both Theodora and al-Khayzuran never meet that unattainable ideal model of the Virgin Mary but they were compared to previous female rulers by male writers.

Theodora in comparison failed to meet the standards of the ideal model based on Procopius' depiction of Domitia in *Secret History*. Despite both not having male heirs, Theodora was able to negotiate her own power from within the imperial palace. The *gynaikonitis* allowed Theodora to act outside of her prescribed role of femininity ascribed by Procopius. Liz James, in *Empresses and Power*, argues that empresses were not "female kings" but that they had access to power.¹⁸⁶ To further James's argument, it was Theodora's close association with her male spouse that allowed her to cross the constructed boundary of masculine authority. Yet Theodora's performance should not have threatened masculinity, which she did, according to Procopius.¹⁸⁷ Procopius presented Domitia as the ideal model in opposition to Theodora's humble upbringing; as he inserted the portion about Domitia prior to his discussion of the origins of Theodora. Procopius overlooked Domitia's infidelity because unlike Theodora she remained out of government affairs. Theodora, who was once used by male clients as an object of desire, took control of her own body and the bodies that once controlled hers, the male dominant aristocracy became the objects of her rule. It was this power that not only violated Procopius' view of the ideal model but put fear into his

¹⁸⁶ James, *Empresses and Power*, 4.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

heart because his *Secret History* was never published in his lifetime, as he knew what would happen if Theodora or Justinian discovered it. For Procopius, Theodora performed outside the boundary of acceptable femininity, which challenged the patriarchal social structure of Byzantium.

Al-Khayzuran, like the ideal model Fatima, gained prestige in the performance of motherhood, unlike Theodora. Al-Khayzuran effectively ruled the harem and gained status by producing two male heirs. Her conflict with her son, al-Hadi, reinforced the traditional view that the main role for women within the harem was to remain in seclusion, valued solely for their role in childrearing. Yet life within the harem was more complicated, as al-Khayzuran actively participated in politics and wielded immense political influence both within and without the harem during the reign of her husband and her two sons. She was the second wife and yet her two sons inherited the caliphate. No other Abbasid queen accomplished this feat either before or after her. She was acknowledged by male historians for her material function of motherhood but ignored as a skillful and powerful politician.

Al-Khayzuran was reproached by her son al-Hadi when she interfered in court politics, much as Aisha was for her involvement in political matters during the Rashidun caliphate.¹⁸⁸ Al-Hadi's actions most certainly angered her when her eldest son commanded her to remain within the institutional body of the harem. In a way, al-Hadi was naïve to think that al-Khayzuran had no political power from within the harem. It was in fact within the institutional body of the harem that al-Khayzuran had the most political power. Mernissi, in *Forgotten Queens of Islam*, explains that al-Khayzuran was aware of the division between women's space, the harem, and masculine space, the public sphere, and that she did not intend to break these barriers physically but "manipulate[d] the public sphere from the private sphere."¹⁸⁹ Sadly, her eldest son was too inept to figure out that her political power came from within the harem. Furthermore, al-Khayzuran was in charge of the women in the

¹⁸⁸ The Rashidun caliphate refers to the formation of Islam during the caliphate of the first four caliphs: Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali.

¹⁸⁹ Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, 62.

harem, including family members, former Umayyad princesses, concubines, and slaves. Al-Hadi's murder of two slave girls for their sexual acts, possibly under the supervision of al-Khayzuran, and her humiliation by her son, provided sufficient motive for the death of al-Hadi by al-Khayzuran who wanted to return to the political sphere. Al-Khayzuran's involvement in court politics violated the ideal model much like Aisha was criticized for being involved in court politics and inciting the first *fitna*, Islamic civil war.

The story of the Battle of the Camel reinforced the societal division between the private space of women and the public space of men in Islamic narratives. It was within this framework that al-Khayzuran was similar to Aisha in that they were both involved in the public space of men. Al-Khayzuran made government appointments from within the harem and stopped only when her eldest son al-Hadi reproached her actions. In the same way Aisha was criticized for her actions against Ali at the Battle of the Camel. Aisha's loss to Ali at the Battle of the Camel reinforced the dominant male narrative of the exclusion of women from government affairs. When al-Hadi scolded his mother for interfering in government affairs he was referring to this historical event, which cost the lives of hundreds of Muslims but also reinforced the misogynist ideal that women should remain outside of politics.

Female rulers negotiated their power in relation to their husbands. Their power came from their relation to their husbands' authority, which allowed them to negotiate their material body in reinforcing their own power and authority from within the women's quarters. Even after the events of the Battle of the Camel, the Islamic community still sought advice from Aisha because of her close relationship with the Prophet. Despite the restrictions al-Hadi placed on his mother, al-Khayzuran retained her political power even after her husband's death. In the same way Theodora gained her political influence from her association with her husband, despite not producing a male heir. Both female rulers gained power from their husbands, but both also wielded their own political power within the imperial court.

CONCLUSION

There were striking parallels in the roles of both empresses as slaves, concubines, and rulers. Both Theodora and al-Khayzuran came from humble origins; their roles as slaves in the historical narrative were used for a specific purpose by writers in late antiquity. Procopius

criticized Theodora's low social status and upbringing while al-Tabari's account was more a statement of facts to be related. According to al-Tabari, al-Khayzuran was bought as a slave by the caliph al-Mansur as a present for his son al-Mahdi. From the very beginning of the story, al-Khayzuran was as an object of desire; she was valued for her material body for the pleasure of al-Mahdi, the caliph's son. Procopius recounted Theodora's mother displaying her and her sisters in front of the circus factions as objects of desire. Theodora eventually sold her body to the lowliest of clients as she continued to be viewed as an object of desire. Both Theodora and al-Khayzuran had no option as they sold, with or without consent, their material body for the amusement of men. As single women they were viewed as sexual objects but once they were married they were expected to remain chaste to their husband.

Female rulers were expected to be faithful to their husbands and to produce a male heir. Both imperial women were able to negotiate their power in collaboration with their spouses. Al-Tabari recorded that even after al-Mahdi's death al-Khayzuran continued to rule as she did when he was alive. Procopius' *Secret History* provided his understood notions of femininity, which were broken by Theodora. Both Theodora and al-Khayzuran were able to negotiate their material bodies to control both the private and public sphere of their respected societies.

CHAPTER 3

RELIGIOUS BODIES

Theodora and al-Khayzuran performed acts of piety derived from previous ideal “models” that were constructed by male writers within their respective societies. These models included such exemplary women as Helena, Macrina, and Aelia Flavia Flacilla in the Byzantine Empire and Aisha and Zainab in the Abbasid caliphate. The ideal characteristics of piety associated with these female rulers were: philanthropy, religious orthodoxy, and loyalty to their husbands. Theodora and al-Khayzuran were slandered by male historians Procopius and al-Tabari when they were thought to deviate from these expectations. Yet not all male historians interpreted their actions in the same light; they were represented as pious rulers by the chronicler John Malalas and the historians John of Ephesus and al-Masudi. Theodora and al-Khayzuran’s pious actions included funding the construction of religious buildings, being charitable to the poor, undertaking religious pilgrimages, and protecting the weak. Theodora and al-Khayzuran used these acts of piety to strengthen and reinforce their political power.

MODELS OF CHRISTIAN PIETY

Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine, embodied the expectations of imperial piety during the transition to Christianity in the Roman Empire. Helena’s alleged discovery of the True Cross, the instrument of Jesus’ death, helped to cement her exalted position within the new religion. In *Unrivalled Influence*, Judith Herrin states that the canonization of Helena elevated her status comparable to earlier Christian martyrs.¹⁹⁰ In *Empresses and Power*, Liz James argues that Helena was praised as a blessed mother and that the fourth-century Church

¹⁹⁰ Herrin, *Unrivalled Influence*, 139-140.

Father Ambrose compared her to the Virgin Mary, stating that just as Mary had vindicated Eve from the Fall so too did Helena in balancing the actions of previous Roman emperors who had persecuted Christians.¹⁹¹ Helena's piety, pilgrimage, and philanthropy provided new avenues for Christian women to seek salvation apart from martyrdom.¹⁹² The Church Fathers praised the actions of Helena in funeral orations, providing a model for future imperial women to follow.

Helena was not the only model for feminine piety in late antiquity. Fourth-century Church Father Gregory of Nyssa described the virtuous qualities of his sister in the *Life of Macrina*.¹⁹³ Macrina was described as removing all material luxuries from her life, specifically the inheritance left to her by her father, which she gave to the church. In addition, Gregory praised Macrina for maintaining her virginity, for taking care of their mother, and for performing household chores that servants were normally paid to do.¹⁹⁴ Overall, Gregory presented Macrina as a pious woman who was more concerned with acquiring heavenly wealth than with earthly possessions and comforts. Christian women in late antiquity, including imperial women, were expected to provide charity to the poor and the Church, to remain faithful to their spouse, and to maintain modesty in both the public and private sphere.

Fourth-century Cappadocian Church Fathers Gregory Nazianzen and Gregory of Nyssa outlined ideal feminine virtue in their funeral orations for pious women. Gregory Nazianzen described the positive virtues of his sister Gorgonia in maintaining modesty in public and private, showing reverence towards clergymen, caring for strangers, and raising

¹⁹¹ James, *Empresses and Power*, 14.

¹⁹² The travels of late fourth-century Christian pilgrim Egeria and the travels of Mary and Euphemia, recorded by John of Ephesus, reflect the transition of martyrdom to pilgrimages taken by women, which was modeled by Helena during the early fourth century.

¹⁹³ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Macrina*. Virginia Burrus described the *Life of Macrina* as a "philosophical biography," whereas the account of Gorgonia was in the literary style of a funeral oration. Virginia Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 154.

¹⁹⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Macrina* 964C-966A.

her children in the Chalcedonian Christian tradition.¹⁹⁵ In *Theodosian Empresses*, Kenneth Holum describes how Gregory of Nyssa's fourth-century funeral oration for Empress Aelia Flavia Flaccilla extolled ideal feminine virtues: performing acts of philanthropy, being committed to her husband, being modest, and having religious zeal. These virtues were evident in Gregory's description of Flaccilla:

This ornament of the Empire has gone from us, this rudder of justice, the image of philanthropy or, rather, its archetype. This model of wifely love has been taken away, this undefiled monument of chastity, dignified but approachable, clement but to be despised, humble but exalted, modest but ready to speak boldly---a harmonious mixture of all the virtues. This zeal of faith has departed from us, this pillar of the church, decoration of altars, wealth of the needy, the right hand which satisfied many, the common haven of those who are heavy laden. Let the virgins mourn, widows grieve, and the orphans lament: let them know what they had now that they have her no more!¹⁹⁶

Furthermore, Holum describes Flaccilla distributing soup and medicine to the poor at a hospital in Constantinople, as well as performing tasks associated with kitchen servants.¹⁹⁷ These uncommon acts performed by Flaccilla contributed to her image as a pious imperial ruler. In *Women of Byzantium*, Connor states that these virtuous qualities described by Gregory of Nyssa set the new standard of virtue for imperial women to emulate.¹⁹⁸ Flaccilla represented the ideal empress in regards to virtue and piety and became the ideal model for future empresses, like Theodora, to emulate.

MODELS OF MUSLIM PIETY

Women in the Islamic world were held to a similar set of virtues. During the eighth century Aisha was the principle model of Islamic piety.¹⁹⁹ After the death of the Prophet,

¹⁹⁵ Gregory Nazianzen, "On his Sister, St. Gorgonia," in *Funeral Orations*, trans. Leo P. McCauley, John J. Sullivan, Martin R. P. McGuire, and J. Deferrari (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1953), 3.8-12.

¹⁹⁶ Kenneth G. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses: Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 23.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

¹⁹⁸ Carolyn Loessel Connor, *Women of Byzantium* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 50.

¹⁹⁹ Aisha's legacy shifts in the historiography during the ninth and tenth centuries and she became a model of impiety because of her participation in the Battle of the Camel.

Aisha became a source of authority as she attracted large numbers of both men and women who sought her advice.²⁰⁰ Walther describes how Aisha created ethical rules of conduct for Muslims to live by: honesty, protection of the innocent, kindness towards slaves, and reverence towards one's parents.²⁰¹ Aisha was said to have freed forty of her slaves; the manumission of so many slaves was meant to demonstrate her piety.²⁰² In addition, Aisha was said to have shunned a life of luxury, wearing repaired articles of clothes in remembrance of the Prophet's humble upbringings.²⁰³ She also reprimanded elite men for wearing luxurious attire.²⁰⁴ Aisha's high status among the wives of the Prophet, her austere lifestyle, and her wisdom as a source for the Prophet's sayings resulted in her being a model of piety for Muslim women.

Aisha was not the only wife of the Prophet remembered for her piety. Another of the Prophet's wives, Zainab, was admired for her charity. The Prophet's other wives, Aisha included, modeled their actions of philanthropy, alms giving, and piety after those of Zainab.²⁰⁵ Sura 17: 26-29 details the practice of almsgiving as mandatory for those who are financially able. In addition to her austere lifestyle, religious wisdom, and philanthropy, Aisha expressed piety through pilgrimages to Mecca.²⁰⁶

Making the pilgrimage to Mecca is one of the five pillars or essential obligations of Islam. Sura 2:196 in the Quran requires Muslims to participate in the pilgrimage to Mecca if

²⁰⁰ Wiebke Walther, *Women in Islam: From Medieval to Modern Times* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener, 1993), 106.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Abbott, *Aisha*, 211.

²⁰³ Ibid., 212.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 99. Abbott discussed in length the internal rivalry of the Prophet's wives, as they all tried to impress their husband.

²⁰⁶ See Abbott, *Aisha*, which further explains that after the death of the Prophet his wives were prohibited from making the pilgrimage to Mecca during the holy month of Ramadan as a way to protect them from harassment from the Muslim community. Umar, the third Rashidun caliph, initially prohibited Aisha and the other widows of the Prophet from going on pilgrimage to Mecca; he rescinded this order on his deathbed, however, and Uthman, who succeeded him, also allowed women to go on pilgrimage.

they are physically and financially able, and in the following verse, pilgrims are also instructed to remain chaste and righteous for the duration of their journey. While he was alive, the wives of the Prophet made the journey multiple times. In addition, financially wealthy Muslims completed several pilgrimages to reflect their piety. Both Aisha and Zainab served as models of piety for subsequent affluent Muslim women to emulate.

In both religious traditions, Theodora and al-Khayzuran were expected to donate money to charity, to protect the weak, to remain faithful wives, and to practice orthodox religion faithfully. Al-Khayzuran belonged to the large majority of Sunni Muslims, whereas Theodora did not belong to the orthodox Chalcedonian Church, but rather to the Monophysite (Anti-Chalcedonian) community.²⁰⁷ Monophysite Church father and historian John of Ephesus portrayed Theodora as a pious, god-fearing queen and Sunni historian al-Masudi presented al-Khayzuran as a pious queen mother. Whether orthodox or not, both women exemplified conventional pieties as both John of Ephesus and al-Masudi praised Theodora and al-Khayzuran for their piety and their philanthropy.

PILGRIMAGES AND PHILANTHROPY

Religious pilgrimages and philanthropy have a long tradition in both Christianity and Islam. Byzantine chronicler John Malalas recounted the public acts of piety by both Justinian and Theodora after they were crowned rulers of Byzantium in 527 CE. Malalas praised Justinian for his construction of church buildings, for his financial donations to cities, and for the construction of public buildings like baths and cisterns.²⁰⁸ Likewise, Theodora was praised for her donation of a “very costly cross, set with pearls” that was sent to Jerusalem.²⁰⁹ Theodora’s donation of the pearled cross followed in the tradition of patronage set by

²⁰⁷ Despite not belonging to the Chalcedonian Church, Theodora continued to model acts of piety that were established by the fourth-century Patristic Fathers.

²⁰⁸ John Malalas, *The Chronicle of John Malalas* 17.422.9-21, 423.1-12.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.423.1-12, 243.

Helena. Because of Theodora's humble upbringing she needed to maintain her legitimacy with the populace, which she did by following the tradition of philanthropy and pilgrimage.

Theodora's philanthropy was evident during her pilgrimage to the Pythion hot springs. Malalas described Theodora's piety in her donation of money to churches during the course of her trip to the hot springs at Pythion in 529 CE.²¹⁰ The Pythion hot springs had a long tradition as both a spiritual and medicinal destination for travelers. Local inhabitants believed that a deity resided underneath the earth and the steam that emanated from the earth contained healing properties from the deity.²¹¹ Further evidence for the general medicinal purpose of hot springs was found in a mid-seventh century Greek inscription near the baths of Hamat Gader in the Palestinian region during the Umayyad caliphate:

In the days of the servant of God Mu'awiya, the commander
of the faithful the hot baths of the
people there were saved and rebuilt
by 'Abd Allah son of Abu Hashim, the
governor, on the fifth of the month of December,
on the second day (of the week), in the 6th year of the indiction,
in the year 726 of the colony, according to the Arabs the 42nd year,
for the healing of the sick, under the care of Ioannes,
the official of Gadara.²¹²

Hot springs functioned as both a means of physical healing and for receiving a spiritual blessing.

In 570 CE, the Christian pilgrim Antoninus of Piacenza on his journey to Jerusalem recorded how he hoped to "gain a blessing" when he used the hot springs in Cana and once

²¹⁰ Ibid., 18.441.8-12, 256.

²¹¹ The Pythion Hot Springs are located in the present-day town of Yalova in Turkey. "The History of Yalova," accessed December 1, 2015, <http://www.investinyalova.gov.tr/PortalAdmin/Uploads/MarkaYalova/Menu/Menu-afd904646808.html>.

²¹² Judith Green and Yoram Tsafrir, "Greek Inscriptions from Hammat Gader: A Poem by the Empress Eudocia and Two Building Inscriptions," *Israel Exploration Journal* 32, no. 2/3 (1982), 95.

again when he immersed himself into the Jordan River.²¹³ The pilgrimage of Antoninus of Piacenza also recorded how pilgrims left behind offerings at the sacred sites in thanks for their healing.²¹⁴ We can therefore conclude that the purpose of Theodora's pilgrimage to the Pythion hot springs was either for medicinal or spiritual reasons or both. Malalas recorded her journey to the hot springs sometime after she and Justinian were crowned empress and emperor in 527 CE. It is likely that her journey was motivated by her desire to heal her body or gain a spiritual blessing so she might conceive a male heir for Justinian, something she had been unable to do for the previous five years.

Theodora's piety was associated with her fecundity, especially in producing a male heir to secure the dynastic succession.²¹⁵ In 531 CE Mar Saba, a Chalcedonian priest, journeyed to Constantinople and he was visited by Theodora who asked for his blessing.²¹⁶ Mar Saba replied that he would not pray for her to conceive as she might raise the child to be an enemy of the Chalcedonian faith.²¹⁷ Yet Procopius insisted on presenting an impious empress in Theodora and attacked her piety in describing her lasciviousness prior to becoming empress, the forced arranged marriages she used to exploit wealth from others, and the killing of a son who was born to her while she was a circus performer. These creative stories by Procopius attacked her pious character. Mar Saba refused to bless Theodora for doctrinal reasons and Procopius attacked Theodora's piety. Invective rhetoric was employed by writers in late antiquity, like Procopius, to describe the qualities of a bad empress.²¹⁸ Despite Procopius' invective against Theodora and Mar Saba's refusing to bless her, Theodora's pilgrimage to the Pythion hot spring revealed how she followed the ideal model of piety espoused by the Church Fathers and maintained her faithfulness towards her husband Justinian by attempting to secure the dynastic succession.

²¹³ Gary Vikan, *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1982), 11.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

²¹⁵ Connor, *Women of Byzantium*, 50.

²¹⁶ Evans, *The Empress Theodora*, 75.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

²¹⁸ James, *Empresses and Power*, 16.

Theodora, unfortunately, did not secure the dynastic succession, but she groomed and trained her niece Sophia as an imperial partner to her nephew Justin II. At the time of the imperial acclamation of Justin II, Sophia demonstrated her piety by donating a piece of the True Cross to Radegund of Poitiers.²¹⁹ Sophia also maintained equal power with Justin II, the same as held by Theodora with Justinian. Justin II suffered from mental illness and Sophia became the principle ruler of Byzantium, as suggested by coinage from her reign, minted with her image.²²⁰ Theodora's influence on Sophia was not recorded, but the panegyrics translated by James showed how Sophia was praised in the same way that Malalas and John of Ephesus praised the piety of Theodora.

As with Theodora and Sophia, al-Khayzuran instructed and mentored her daughter-in-law Zubaidah, wife of al-Rashid, in court politics. Zubaidah funded engineering projects that increased the water supply at Mecca because of the increasing numbers of pilgrims, financed public hostels and mosques, and underwrote the ambitious engineering project of clearing the pilgrim road from Kufa in Iraq to Mecca, which covered nine hundred miles of desert.²²¹ Zubaidah provided financial support in rebuilding the city of Tibriz in northern Persia that had been destroyed by a massive earthquake.²²² Her palace was embellished with columns decorated with gold and ivory with inscriptions from the Quran that were inscribed on the walls in gold.²²³ She had female servants who took turns in reciting verses from the Quran, her food was served on gold and silver plates, and she was carried around in a silk-covered palanquin made out of silver and ebony.²²⁴ Her luxurious lifestyle established a physical reminder of her own wealth and power to her visitors. Her philanthropic projects

²¹⁹ Ibid., 12.

²²⁰ Evans, *The Empress Theodora*, 117.

²²¹ Bobrick, *The Caliph's Splendor*, 59.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Ibid., 58.

²²⁴ Ibid.

were a public demonstration that she was the important and influential wife of the caliph al-Rashid.

In 766 CE, while al-Khayzuran was still a concubine in al-Mahdi's harem, she fulfilled her religious duty by going to Mecca during the holy month of Ramadan. Al-Mahdi and al-Khayzuran maintained close contact with their subjects during their religious pilgrimages. Al-Mahdi's religious pilgrimages to Mecca had two principle functions: to display his power by distributing alms to the poor and to showcase his religious charity during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan.²²⁵ Al-Khayzuran's third pilgrimage to Mecca functioned similarly to al-Mahdi's, as her pilgrimage displayed the return of her power after the death of her son al-Hadi and also her religious piety in distributing alms to the poor.

The religious pilgrimages made by Theodora and al-Khayzuran also served as a means of improving their social and political status. Malalas' description of Theodora's journey to the Pythion hot springs was highlighted by her display of wealth and authority but was also motivated by her desire to heal her body. For Theodora, her donation of the jeweled cross followed the tradition of Helena who provided public acts of piety; it was also a physical and public reminder of Theodora's wealth and power. In the same way the pilgrimage made by al-Khayzuran while she was still a concubine was motivated by her desire to return to Baghdad as a free woman and as the wife to al-Mahdi. Al-Khayzuran's social status as the queen mother on her last pilgrimage to Mecca was highlighted with the restoration of mosques and commissioning of water wells, which like Theodora, was a physical and public reminder of her own wealth and power. There are no records of Theodora's making a pilgrimage prior to her elevated status as empress but in Procopius' *Secret History*, he disclosed a fanciful tale about how Theodora made her way up from North Africa to Constantinople after she had a dream in which she would meet and marry the "King

²²⁵ Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad*, 117. Al-Mahdi's piety did not end with the distribution of alms to the poor during the pilgrimage. He eliminated the *maqsura*, an enclosed space within a mosque that separated nobility from the laity, and lowered the height of the pulpit in mosques to maintain a greater sense of equality within the mosque.

of Demons” and she would be financially rich for her entire life.²²⁶ Reading through Procopius’ attributed motivations for Theodora’s journey to Constantinople reveals Theodora’s underlying actions as an opportunity to change her fortune, in the same way al-Khayzuran was motivated to change her own social status after her religious pilgrimage. In “Theodora: Fantasy and Faction,” Potter suggests that Theodora did not scheme her way up to Constantinople. At this time she was the concubine of Hecebolus and was found to be pregnant with his child; she was abandoned in North Africa, which was also heavily populated with Monophysite Christians and suggests that her strong support for the Monophysite community may have been in response to their care for her while she was pregnant and abandoned.²²⁷

Theodora and al-Khayzuran followed in the religious tradition of pilgrimages as a public reminder of their piety and their distribution of alms to the needy and construction of religious buildings also reflected this tradition of piety and philanthropy. Piety was also performed through their loyalty towards their spouses in maintaining dynastic succession. Despite Theodora not producing a male heir, she remained faithful to her husband. Theodora and al-Khayzuran performed the ritual of going on a religious pilgrimage to change their status; and once their status was changed they ensured the welfare of others, specifically other women, as long as it did not interfere with their own power.

PROTECTION OF THE WEAK

Theodora looked after the welfare of young women in the Byzantine Empire and ensured that they were protected from harm and remained chaste. Justinian oversaw the revision and consolidation of the Roman legal books from 526 to 536 CE. In addition to organizing older Roman law codes, Justinian also amended existing laws and passed new ones, “called ‘constitutions’—*Novellae constitutiones*, or Novels.”²²⁸ Theodora’s influence

²²⁶ Procopius, *Secret History* 13.

²²⁷ Potter, “Theodora: Fantasy and Faction.”

²²⁸ Timothy Kearley, “Introduction to Justinian’s Novels,” in *Annotated Justinian Code*, 2nd ed., trans. Fred H. Blume (Laramie: University of Wyoming, College of Law George W. Hopper Law Library, 2014), 1,

on these legal codes is evident in Novel 14, a 535 CE law titled, “That there shall be no panders in any part of the Roman Republic,” which protected young women and girls from being forced into prostitution:

We have increased the penalties against [panders] persons engaged in this nefarious practice and corrected by other laws matters overlooked by our predecessors...[Panders] deceive poverty stricken girls, ensnare them by promising them shoes and clothing, bring them to this city, confine them in their own lodging places, feed and clothe them scantily and offer them up to anyone’s pleasure; that they take the evil income from prostituting the bodies of the girls...Some of them have been so wicked as to induce girls less than ten years old to commit dangerous debauchery. ...Some one [perhaps Theodora] at one time reported these facts to us secretly, but recently the magnificent praetors, ordered by us to investigate the matter, have reported the same thing. ...[Therefore we] forbid any woman to be led into unchastity by trickery, fraud or force. No one shall carry on the trade of pandering, prostitute women in his house or in public for gratification of the passions, or do any other act to that end.²²⁹

Justinian’s continued commitment to protecting prostitutes was evident in a subsequent law, Novel 51 titled, “That no surety or oath shall be asked from women on the stage that they will remain in such calling,” which he put into effect in 537 CE. After he outlawed demanding sureties of prostitutes, panders began demanding oaths instead of sureties in order to keep women earning money for them. Novel 51 stated:

We know we recently enacted a law forbidding anyone from asking from women about to go on the stage any sureties that they would persevere in that calling, deprived of opportunity for repentance. . . . For since we have prohibited men from demanding sureties, they have devised a method leading to greater ungodliness, for their demand and oath from the women that they will never desert from their ungodly and dishonorable work; and these miserable women, thus deceived, prostitute their modesty so as to keep their oath . . .²³⁰

accessed December 1, 2015, http://www.uwyo.edu/lawlib/blume-justinian/_files/docs/novels_intro_2014.pdf.

²²⁹ Fred H. Blume, “Novel 14,” in *Annotated Justinian Code*. For more information about Theodora’s influence on the Justinianic Code see Gillian Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 30.

²³⁰ Fred H. Blume, “Novel 51 Preface.”

Theodora's childhood and prior occupation as a child prostitute and actress seemed to have influenced the laws that Justinian passed concerning pandering in the 530s. In addition, Malalas attested to Theodora's protection of young women who unwillingly and unknowingly signed a contract with brothel-keepers who forced them into prostitution:

[Theodora] ordered that all such brothel-keepers should be arrested...and freed the girls from the yoke of their wretched slavery, ordering henceforward there should be no brothel-keepers. She presented the girls with a set of clothes and dismissed them with one *nomisma* each.²³¹

No doubt, the protection of young women from a life of forced prostitution stemmed from Theodora's own life experience as a circus entertainer. Theodora ensured the protection of young women and made sure that young women would never be victims to brothel keepers. Theodora's own life experiences influenced her actions in protecting young women and the Monophysite community. The Monophysite community protected the young Theodora when she was pregnant and abandoned;²³² now as an empress she had the power to return the favor.

Theodora harbored and protected members of the Monophysite community within the *gynaikonitis*. Monophysite priests, John of Ephesus and Michael the Syrian, recorded her pious actions during a period of time when Justinian was enforcing orthodoxy, which resulted in the persecution of the Monophysite community. In *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, John of Ephesus focused on her role as the believing queen who protected members of the Monophysite community from religious persecution rather than elaborate on her life as a prostitute as Procopius did in *Secret History*.²³³ In the *vitae* of Thomas and Stephen, John of Ephesus briefly acknowledged Theodora's life prior to her new role as empress: "[God] directed the virtuous Stephen to Theodora, who came from the brothel, who was at that time a patrician, but eventually became queen also with King Justinian."²³⁴ Theodora was also

²³¹ Malalas, *Chronicle* 18.440.14-441.7.

²³² Potter, "Theodora: Fantasy and Faction."

²³³ John of Ephesus called Theodora the "believing queen" as she was part of the non-orthodox Monophysite community and helped appease the persecution of Monophysite clergy.

²³⁴ John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints* 13.

discussed positively by the twelfth-century Syriac chronicler, Michael the Syrian, who mistakenly referred to her as the daughter of a Monophysite priest.²³⁵ For both of these Monophysite church writers the discussion about Theodora's early lifestyle was never important or worthy of discussion, only that she was a strong supporter of the Monophysite community. For example, both Michael the Syrian and John of Ephesus described how Theodora took care of the persecuted Monophysite community in the Hormizdas palace precinct in Constantinople, which numbered five hundred refugees.²³⁶ Despite the positive depictions of Theodora by these two Syriac writers, she was remembered in association with prominent men within the Monophysite community.

Theophanes, a ninth-century Byzantine chronicler, also described Theodora as "the most pious Augusta" and focused on her involvement within the Monophysite community. Theophanes described how she selected Anthimos, a Monophysite, as the Bishop of Constantinople. Anthimos occupied the position for about a year until the Bishop of Rome deposed him from his office and the ex-bishop of Constantinople remained in Theodora's protection in her women's quarters until her death.²³⁷ Theodora was remembered as a nurturer and as a protector of the persecuted in the historical narratives.

Malalas depicted the virtuous acts of both Justinian and Theodora in the fire accident that left three young women fatherless. Eulalios, a member of the imperial bodyguard unit, lost all of his property in a fire but managed to save his three daughters.²³⁸ In his will he gave Justinian the task of dispensing of what was remaining in his savings to pay off debts and to ensure that his three daughters had a dowry.²³⁹ Unfortunately an auditor disclosed to Justinian that the savings left by Eulalios were insufficient to pay off his debts and to ensure sufficient dowries for the three daughters. Malalas stated that Justinian paid off the debts left

²³⁵ Michael the Syrian, *Chronique* 20.277.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.278.

²³⁷ Theophanes, *Chronicle* A.M. [*Annus Mundi*] 6045.

²³⁸ Malalas, *Chronicle* 18.439.8-440.13.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

by Eulalios from his own money, ensured that the three daughters were financially taken care of, and left them in the protection and guidance of Empress Theodora.²⁴⁰ The pious act done by Justinian leaves one to believe that the three daughters were cared for by Theodora but it is unclear what happened to these three daughters, as even their names or fates were not disclosed in the narrative. Malalas continued his narrative of the piety of Theodora in her protection of young women from prostitution as discussed earlier. In Malalas' account, both Justinian and Theodora's piety were reflected in their actions towards the protection of the disenfranchised.

In *Secret History*, Procopius presented an impious Theodora in her interactions with the Gothic queen regent Amalasuntha. Amalasuntha was the daughter of the Gothic king Theodoric and queen regent for her two sons. According to Procopius, Amalasuntha contemplated relocating to Constantinople because of political strife that was occurring in the Italian peninsula.²⁴¹ Procopius accused Theodora of being suspicious of Amalasuntha because of her high social status, royal lineage, beauty, and intellect.²⁴² Justinian agreed to Theodora's request to arrange for the assassination of Amalasuntha; the man she chose to do it had a change of heart, however, and persuaded Amalasuntha's husband to send her safely away from the reach of Theodora and Justinian.²⁴³ In Procopius' *Secret History*, Theodora's actions were motivated by jealousy and spitefulness. In "Amalasuntha, Procopius, and a Women's Place," Frankforter argues that the drama between Theodora and Amalasuntha was created by Procopius as there was no concrete evidence for Theodora's jealousy of Amalasuntha.²⁴⁴ Procopius was not consistent in the narrative of the demise of Amalasuntha in *Secret History* in comparison to his *Wars*; still, he maintained his misogynistic rhetoric in *Secret History* in depicting a potential conflict between Theodora and Amalasuntha over

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Procopius, *Secret History* 16.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ A. Daniel Frankforter, "Amalasuntha, Procopius, and a Women's Place," *Journal of Women's History* 8, no. 2 (1996): 49.

Justinian. Procopius created this conflict between Theodora and Amalsuntha as part of his invective against the character of Theodora in order to show her impious nature.

Al-Masudi described the pious deed of al-Khayzuran toward a former Umayyad princess Munza. Despite the private nature of this affair, the actions of al-Khayzuran reflected the changing attitudes toward the previous ruling Umayyad caliphate. In this account by al-Masudi, al-Mahdi instructed al-Khayzuran to watch and observe Zainab, the daughter of Ali and Fatima, who had sat in the place of honor in the harem before al-Khayzuran.²⁴⁵ Al-Masudi described the interaction between Zainab and the former Umayyad princess Munza, which were observed by al-Khayzuran. Munza in tattered clothing pleaded with Zainab to show pity on her as she was afraid for her life out in the public streets.²⁴⁶ Zainab refused to help the former Umayyad princess as she reminded Munza of a similar situation: “I [Zainab] had come to beg you for the body of the Imam Ibrahim [my father-in-law] and you refused me and had me turned out, saying: It is not for women to meddle in the affairs of men!”²⁴⁷ Al-Khayzuran witnessed this interaction and secretly aided and assisted the powerless Umayyad princess with clothing and with an apartment that was kept secret from Zainab.²⁴⁸ Al-Khayzuran revealed these events to al-Mahdi and he praised her pious actions towards Munza.²⁴⁹ Al-Mahdi in turn “invited [Munza] to sit by him and gave her a place of above that of Zainab.”²⁵⁰ Consequently, al-Khayzuran’s own status was elevated within the harem of al-Mahdi due to her pity towards the former Umayyad princess. It is possible that al-Khayzuran assisted the dispossessed Umayyad princess for purely altruistic reasons; it is also possible that she was attempting to make Zainab look bad and in so doing

²⁴⁵ Al-Masudi, *The Meadows of Gold* 6.234-40.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

advance her own status within the harem. Al-Masudi presented a pious al-Khayzuran, while subsequent historians only focused on her involvement in the death of her son al-Hadi.

Theodora's Amalasuntha and al-Khayzuran's Zainab both shared similar characteristics in the historical narrative. They were both wealthy aristocrats, of noble blood, and intelligent. Yet it was the piety of al-Khayzuran that was recorded by Abbasid historian al-Masudi, whereas Procopius revealed the impious qualities of the Empress Theodora in her plot to kill Amalasuntha. Procopius suggested that Theodora should have been hospitable towards Amalasuntha in the same manner al-Khayzuran was to the former Umayyad princess Munza, described by al-Masudi two centuries later. For these male historians, jealousy was not conducive to the character of a pious female ruler. Nonetheless, the motives attributed to Theodora and al-Khayzuran were completely different. Procopius accused Theodora of being jealous of a potential rivalry with Amalasuntha. Procopius did not accuse Theodora of attempting to steal property or wealth from Amalasuntha, but he accused her of being jealous because of her own lack of royal lineage and her humble upbringing. Al-Khayzuran's motive in protecting the Umayyad princess Munza stemmed from her wanting to elevate her own status over Zainab's in al-Mahdi's harem. Al-Khayzuran successfully positioned herself within the harem but more importantly within al-Mahdi's sight. Both the narratives of Procopius and al-Masudi provided examples of piety or impiety for imperial women to emulate. Imperial women were expected to show compassion for the weak and disenfranchised, not to plot in their demise.

RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS

The commissioning of religious buildings by imperial women served as one manifestation of their public piety. These constructions were an extension of the more common practice of donating money and holy items to religious institutions performed by many of the ideal models. Theodora commissioned religious buildings with and without Justinian's financial assistance, and al-Khayzuran refurbished important religious buildings on the pilgrimage route towards Mecca. Both imperial women used their political position to finance the construction of religious buildings as a public reminder of their piety and power.

John Malalas described the piety of both Justinian and Theodora in their construction of church buildings after their imperial acclamation in 527 CE. Justinian built churches and

public buildings like “a hospice, baths, and a cistern” in the city of Antioch.²⁵¹ Malalas also praised Theodora for her generosity towards the city of Antioch:

Likewise the most devout Theodora also provided much for the city. She built an extremely fine church of the archangel Michael; she also built what is known as the basilica of Anatolius, for which the columns were sent from Constantinople.²⁵²

In *Buildings*, Procopius described how both Justinian and Theodora rebuilt guest houses for the poor that had been destroyed in the Nika Revolt and financed the construction of churches throughout the empire, which Justinian dedicated to the Virgin Mary, St. Anne, and the martyr Zoe.²⁵³ In *Buildings*, Procopius even credited Theodora for her contribution to these public works: “the Empress Theodora helped [Justinian] in this most holy work.”²⁵⁴ Malalas named a few specific churches built with Theodora’s assistance in Antioch not included in Procopius’ list.²⁵⁵

In Constantinople, both Justinian and Theodora financed the construction of the Hagia Sophia after it was destroyed in the Nika Revolt, and the basilica of Saints Sergius and Bacchus. Both of these basilicas included etched monograms placed on pillars with the names of the imperial couple. Theodora’s name was included in both religious buildings. The inscription in the basilica of Saints Sergius and Bacchus included her monogram upon a stone pillar as well as a description of her pious deeds:

Other sovereigns have honored dead men whose labor was unprofitable, but our sceptered Justinian, fostering piety, honors with a splendid abode the Servant of Christ, Begetter of all things, Sergius; whom not the burning breath of fire, nor the sword, nor any other constraint of torments disturbed; but who endured to be slain for the sake of Christ, the God, gaining by his blood heaven as his home. May he in all things guard the rule of the sleepless sovereign and increase the

²⁵¹ Malalas, *Chronicle* 17.423.1-12.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Procopius, *History of the Wars*, 336-38.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 1.2.2.17.

²⁵⁵ Anne L. McClanan, “The Empress Theodora and the Tradition of Women’s Patronage in the Early Byzantine Empire,” in *The Cultural Patronage of Medieval Women*, ed. June Hall McCash, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 61.

power of the God-crowned Theodora whose mind is adorned with piety, whose constant toil lies in unsparing efforts to nourish the destitute.²⁵⁶

This inscription not only described the piety of Theodora, but it also served as another visual reminder of her power. In *The Empress Theodora*, James states that Procopius wrote *Buildings* after Theodora's death and his silence about Theodora as a financial collaborator was because Justinian did not want to seem to be competing with Theodora in the construction of religious buildings.²⁵⁷ Despite not having written testimony of Theodora's contribution to the religious building projects with Justinian, her name appears in the form of a monogram on other religious buildings, which suggest her collaboration.²⁵⁸

Just as Theodora maintained her legitimacy through the construction of church buildings and state buildings for the poor, al-Khayzuran maintained her legitimacy and legacy with the construction and preservation of religious houses and mosques throughout the Abbasid territories. In 788 CE, al-Khayzuran journeyed to Mecca on a religious pilgrimage as the queen mother to al-Rashid.²⁵⁹ On her previous pilgrimage she traveled as a concubine and returned to Baghdad as the wife of al-Mahdi and on this pilgrimage she established her public legacy in the preservation of the House of the Nativity and Arqam's house.²⁶⁰ The House of the Nativity was where the Prophet was born in Mecca and was under the private ownership of the Umayyad family and had been neglected over time.²⁶¹ Al-Khayzuran purchased it and refurnished it as the Mosque of the Nativity.²⁶² Arqam's house was associated with the formative period of Islam and was where the Prophet and his early

²⁵⁶ Quoted in Brian Croke, "Justinian, Theodora, and the Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 60 (2006): 48.

²⁵⁷ James, *The Empress Theodora*, 34.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad*, 118.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Ibid., 118-19.

followers had sought sanctuary from the persecution of the Meccans.²⁶³ Arqam's house was also associated with revelations made by the Prophet.²⁶⁴ For al-Khayzuran, the preservation of these houses symbolized her maternal piety. If we believe the account by al-Tabari, of al-Khayzuran's involvement in her son's death, then one wonders --- at the risk of sounding like one of al-Khayzuran's dubious commentators --- whether these acts of piety were motivated by the guilt of having her son al-Hadi killed. Or maybe she felt remorse over the untimely death of her eldest son and compensated for her loss by preserving the houses that were symbolically important in the life of the Prophet. Her maternal piety was also evident in her nourishing of religious pilgrims: she commissioned the construction of water wells in Mecca and one near the city of Ramlah in Palestine, which was named after her.²⁶⁵ Finally, she commissioned a water canal to be built near the imperial city of Baghdad and a cemetery in Baghdad was named after her.²⁶⁶

Al-Khayzuran was not alone in her public acts of piety. Her husband al-Mahdi presented gifts, money, and clothing to the needy as he traveled to Mecca and Medina on pilgrimage.²⁶⁷ In 766, al-Mahdi celebrated his coronation by constructing a new mosque in Rusafa near the imperial city of Baghdad and he enlarged the mosques at Basra and Mecca.²⁶⁸ In addition to his construction of religious buildings, he attempted to make peace with the Shi'ite community by returning lands that his father al-Mansur had confiscated.²⁶⁹ Al-Mahdi, much like Justinian, maintained his piety in the construction of religious buildings, alms for the poor, and the maintenance of orthodoxy. Like their husbands,

²⁶³ Ibid., 119.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 120.

²⁶⁶ Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad*, 120-21.

²⁶⁷ Farouk Omar, "Some Observations on the Reign on the Abbasid Caliph al-Mahdi 185/775-169/785," *Arabica* 21, no. 2 (1974): 140.

²⁶⁸ Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World*, 49.

²⁶⁹ Omar, "Some Observations on the Reign on the Abbasid Caliph al-Mahdi," 140.

Theodora and al-Khayzuran used philanthropy and the construction of religious buildings to demonstrate their legitimacy and power as rulers, as well as their personal piety.

CONCLUSION

Al-Khayzuran and Theodora's power and piety were memorialized in their public works and the religious buildings they commissioned. This legacy is also evident in the buildings that were dedicated to them posthumously. The greatest example of this legacy is the mosaic of Theodora at the Church of San Vitale in Ravenna; it is the only certain surviving image of the empress. Another mosaic in the Chalke palace was destroyed, with only a written depiction preserved by Procopius in *Buildings*:

In the middle stand the Emperor and Empress Theodora, both rejoicing and celebrating a victory celebration over the kings of the Vandals and the Goths who have come to them captured and as prisoners. Around them stands the Roman senate, all celebrating. For the stones show this, making their faces alight with joy.²⁷⁰

There is also an unnamed bust that resembles the features of Theodora from the mosaic at St. Vitale.²⁷¹ Even her face and name did not adorn coinage during the reign of Justinian. Imagery is prohibited in Islam and therefore there remains no image of either al-Khayzuran or her husband al-Mahdi and their two sons al-Hadi and al-Rashid. Coinage during the Abbasid caliphate was adorned with Quranic verses. Theodora's piety and regality dominated the mosaic panel at San Vitale.

Neither Justinian nor Theodora sponsored the creation of the mosaics at San Vitale. The mosaic of Theodora is located in the apse of the church. Theodora is flanked on her right by two eunuchs, on her left by two veiled women, and next to them are her five women attendants. On the wall directly across from Theodora's mosaic panel is Justinian's mosaic, in which he is flanked to his right by imperial officials and military troops, on his left are three clergymen, and in the background behind Justinian is another imperial official. The

²⁷⁰ Procopius, *History of the Wars*, 39.

²⁷¹ See fig. 4 in McClanan, "The Empress Theodora," 65. See fig. 26 in Connor, *Women of Byzantium*, 143.

focal of the apse is a mosaic of a young beardless Christ wearing a brown tunic and sitting on top of the world. He is flanked on both sides by an archangel and next to them are the patrons of the Church of San Vitale. Theodora herself is adorned with a golden crown with pearls dangling from it. Her mosaic image commands a sense of imperial power from her crown, her tunic, and her jewelry. There is no doubt that she is the focal point of the mosaic as she is offering a chalice of wine while Justinian is making his offering with a bowl. The artist depicted both sovereigns making a Eucharistic offering; Justinian is offering the bread that will become the Body of Christ and Theodora is offering the wine that will become the Blood of Christ. Both sovereigns were represented in almost equal standing with one another, while their attire and positioning set them apart from the other images in the mosaics.

Justinian's mosaic represents the responsibilities of a ruler, as he is surrounded by imperial advisors, clergy, and the military. This is the acceptable arena for male sovereignty as depicted by the artist just as the acceptable arena for Empress Theodora is within the women's quarters with her eunuchs and ladies in waiting. In "Style and Meaning in the Imperial Panels of San Vitale," Bassett argues that both panels complement one another as the image of Theodora represented grace and highlights the solemnity of Justinian's imperial power.²⁷² The participation of both sovereigns confirms their joint public display of piety. The mosaic of Theodora at St. Vitale remained a lasting legacy and memory of the pious empress opposite her husband Justinian.

The mosaic of Theodora was a visual reminder to the populace of the piety and power of the empress and even without visual imagery the power and piety of al-Khayzuran was known throughout the Abbasid caliphate. In *Unrivaled Influence*, Herrin observes imagery of the imperial feminine in the Byzantine Empire. She notes the depiction of empresses as counterparts to the Virgin Mary as Queen of Heaven. Accordingly, the image of Theodora in

²⁷² Sarah E. Bassett, "Style and Meaning in the Imperial Panels at San Vitale," *Artibus et Historiae* 29, no. 57 (2008): 55.

full imperial regalia as depicted in the St. Vitale mosaic might have served as a reminder of both her spiritual and earthly authority.²⁷³

The mosaic of St. Vitale in Ravenna displayed the power and piety of Theodora in the public sphere as did the refurbishment of sacred spaces in Mecca by al-Khayzuran. Both the Byzantine Empire and Abbasid caliphate enforced their political hegemony as well as the public display of piety through religious pilgrimages, protection of the dispossessed, and construction of religious buildings. Yet these all functioned differently for Theodora and al-Khayzuran. For Theodora, her piety was in her allegiance to the Monophysite community. Procopius' *Buildings* and Malalas' *Chronicle* maintained a positive description of her piety as she donated money to the poor, financed the construction of church buildings, and protected women from forced prostitution. A similar description of al-Khayzuran's piety was recorded by Abbasid historians al-Tabari and al-Masudi, who described her generosity on religious pilgrimages and her kindness with the former Umayyad princess Munza. The Byzantine and Abbasid accounts portrayed the ideal form of piety for female rulers acting outside of the women's quarters and in the public sphere.

Feminine virtue was remembered and reinforced by male historians. These expectations were not modeled after the lives of these imperial women but from the memory of previous pious women who set the mold for appropriate behavior of piety. The funeral oration of Empress Aelia Flavia Flaccilla by Gregory of Nyssa identified the concepts of feminine virtue: piety, humility, philanthropy, and fecundity.²⁷⁴ Theodora followed in the tradition set by Helena in the fourth century as Constantinople became the New Rome under Constantine. The memory of Helena set the standard of piety for noble women in the new Christian empire, just as Aisha was the Islamic model of piety in the Abbasid caliphate. Al-Masudi and al-Tabari focused on al-Khayzuran giving generously to the poor, refurbishing sacred buildings in Mecca, constructing water wells for religious pilgrims, and producing two male heirs. Her piety was somewhat tarnished by her suspected involvement in the death of

²⁷³ Herrin, "The Imperial Feminine in Byzantium," 5.

²⁷⁴ Connor, *Women in Byzantium*, 50.

her son al-Hadi. Procopius provided his expectations of piety in *Secret History*. John of Ephesus and Michael the Syrian attributed to Theodora the protection of Monophysite priests and the refugees she kept safe in the Hormizdas palace precinct. John Malalas and Theophanes noted how individuals earned the displeasure of the empress but focused on her deeds of protecting the disenfranchised, giving alms to the poor, and constructing church buildings.

Theodora and al-Khayzuran's pious actions did not serve solely religious functions but also worked to improve and bolster their political authority. Malalas and Theophanes recorded Theodora's pilgrimage to the hot springs where she was likely attempting to heal her body in order to conceive a male heir for Justinian. Providing a male heir was one of the primary functions of imperial women, and if successful would have improved Theodora's power and standing, which was part of being pious towards one's spouse, the bearing of a male child to secure dynastic succession. Al-Khayzuran's pilgrimages to Mecca also advanced her social and political standing. On her first journey to Mecca, al-Khayzuran became al-Mahdi's imperial concubine, her second trip to Mecca resulted in her manumission, and the third pilgrimage took place after the death of her son al-Hadi, which symbolized her triumphal return to government power and influence. Religious pilgrimages were undertaken by pious, imperial women, and both Theodora and al-Khayzuran used their pilgrimages to advance their social and political standing. Acts of philanthropy and humility also advanced Theodora's and al-Khayzuran's standings. They both faced political rivals and through the construction of religious buildings and the protection of the disenfranchised, they were able to maintain their imperial status in their acts of piety. While Theodora's and al-Khayzuran's acts of piety demonstrated their religiosity, they also reinforced their political power and legitimacy.

CHAPTER 4

TRANSACTING BODIES

Theodora and al-Khayzuran were able to acquire wealth and power as imperial rulers and they were able to safeguard that wealth through the various legal and religious protections available to women in the Byzantine Empire and the Abbasid caliphate. Secular legal codes like the Justinianic Code in Byzantium and religious texts like the Quran in Abbasid society protected the financial wealth of both elite and non-elite women. This chapter explores how Theodora and al-Khayzuran acquired, maintained, and strategically utilized their wealth through an analysis of ideal women's wealth management, by considering how Theodora and al-Khayzuran measured up to those ideals, and by looking at how each woman exercised agency.

ECONOMIC MODELS

Before analyzing how Theodora and al-Khayzuran were able to protect and manage their wealth, it is important to discuss the economic ideal "models" that preceded them: Pulcheria, Anicia Juliana, Khadija, Umm Salama, Raytah, and Arwa. These women were considered to be ideal female rulers and leaders in their respective societies and provided the foundation against which the transacting bodies of Theodora and al-Khayzuran were assessed. Wealthy noble women were expected to act generously with their financial wealth. Byzantine empress Pulcheria and the patrician Anicia Juliana were praised in the historical narrative for their generosity and philanthropy. In the Islamic world, Khadija was remembered as a wealthy business woman who initiated marriage to the young Muhammad and as the first convert to Islam. Umm Salama and Arwa, wives of the first Abbasid caliphs, possessed their own economic wealth independent from caliphs al-Saffa and al-Mansur, their husbands. This analysis is especially important as both Theodora and al-Khayzuran were not born into wealth, and so are unlike the majority of the economic models discussed here. Instead, their wealth and social status were gained through their marriages to high-born and

wealthy husbands, rather than through inheritance as was the case with Pulcheria and Anicia Juliana.

Pulcheria

Fifth-century Byzantine empress Pulcheria was economically independent, wielded considerable spiritual wealth, and engaged in philanthropy. She was the imperial regent for her younger brother Theodosius II, and was a pious and intelligent woman who maintained her vow of chastity, which she modeled after the life of the Virgin Mary. She is remembered also for her religious zeal in orchestrating the Council of Chalcedon and the Council of Ephesus, which reinforced the Nicene Creed and the status of the Virgin Mary as the *theotokos*.²⁷⁵ In 414 CE at the age of fifteen Pulcheria was made *Augusta* by the Senate.²⁷⁶ Her imperial title, her association with Christian relics, and her image on coinage were public reminders of her power and authority as regent.²⁷⁷ The coined image of Pulcheria included her title as *Augusta*, while the reverse side showed a Christianized image of Victory.²⁷⁸ Despite military victories against the Persians, her coinage depicted her with a Christianized Victory or with a laurel wreath around a cross, rather than the weapons or captives that emperors from the Theodosian dynasty used on their coins.²⁷⁹ Despite these gendered differences, she was depicted on coinage independently from her brother, Theodosius II, and later, her husband Marcian, and she was not depicted as an imperial mother. Her power came

²⁷⁵ James, *Empresses and Power*, 14-15.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 102.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 101.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 108.

²⁷⁹ Late Roman empresses and emperors were depicted differently on coinage. Emperors from the Theodosian dynasty were depicted as victorious, being crowned by Victory (Honorius), depicted with a captive (Arcadius, Theodosius I, and Theodosius II), or with a spear or shield (Honorius and Theodosius II). Empresses from the Theodosian dynasty, Aelia Flaccilla, Eudoxia, and Pulcheria, were depicted with Victory, primarily in the seated position, or with a cross inside of a laurel wreath. Federico Gambacorta, *Catalogue of the Late Roman, Byzantine and Barbaric Coins in the Charles University Collection (364 - 1092 A.D.)* (Prague: Karolinum, 2013), 43, 48, 50, 55, 57, 60-61. James argues that the image of Christianized Victory was a substitute for the martial imagery that often appeared on the coinage of male emperors. James, *Empresses and Power*, 108.

independently and not from her male family members and was founded on her chastity and piety.

Pulcheria emphasized her chastity and piety by transforming her quarters into a sacred space and by enforcing her vow of virginity also on her sisters. Pulcheria's actions resulted in a strengthening of her political power as it prevented the creation of any would-be male claimants to the throne. Pulcheria also used her vow of chastity as a means of gaining spiritual wealth and went so far as to house Christian relics within the imperial palace in order to emphasize her, and her family's, Christian piety and authority.²⁸⁰ It was because of her chastity and piety that she was able to exercise power successfully and acquire wealth, despite her not having any children or a male heir, even after her marriage to Marcian in 450 CE.²⁸¹ Byzantine empresses were expected to remain faithful to their husbands, provide charity, and remain faithful to the Church. Pulcheria maintained her economic wealth and power independently from first her brother and then her husband. Her chaste lifestyle, even after her marriage, was a crucial component of her political, spiritual, and economic power and influence. On her death in 453 CE her not inconsiderable wealth was distributed to the poor of Constantinople, according to the instructions in her will.²⁸² Pulcheria left behind a legacy of economic independence, religious piety, and philanthropy for future leaders to emulate, namely, her great-grandniece Anicia Juliana and Theodora who were contemporaries.

²⁸⁰ Connor, *Women of Byzantium*, 56.

²⁸¹ During her lifetime Pulcheria was praised for her leadership in state affairs, however later historians criticized her actions. The seventh-century historian John of Nikiu accused her of being arrogant, and that she possessed unwomanly virtue, by defrauding a widow of her wealth and property. Other accusations against Pulcheria's character included her being sexually immoral, overstepping her status as a woman by publically criticizing her younger brother Theodosius II, and promoting her husband Marcian into high office. James, *Empresses and Power*, 18. John of Nikiu's criticisms of Pulcheria closely resemble Procopius' criticisms of Theodora. Pulcheria was also criticized by the Anti-Chaldean bishop Nestorius who slandered the empress' virtue by stating that she had multiple lovers. Yet Nestorius underestimated the power of Pulcheria, who in collaboration with bishop Cyril of Alexandria, was able to declare the teachings of Nestorius heretical, forcing him and his followers into exile. Vasiliki Limberis, *Divine Heiress: The Virgin Mary and the Making of Christian Constantinople* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 54, 56.

²⁸² Holum, *Theodosian Empresses*, 226.

Anicia Juliana

Anicia Juliana was the wealthiest patroness in sixth-century Byzantium, apart from Theodora, commissioning churches and manuscripts. Her elite and noble lineage, along with her wealth and patronage, made her an ideal economic model for contemporaries to emulate or rival.²⁸³ Her wealth was reflected in the construction of the basilica of St. Polyeuktos in Constantinople and the illustrated manuscript *Vienna Dioscurides* that she commissioned. All that remains of the basilica is a poem, inscribed on the church's interior entrance wall, describing her royal lineage:

Eudokia the empress, eager to honour God, first built here a temple of Polyeuktos the servant of God. But she did not make it as great and as beautiful as it is, not from any economy or lack of possessions—what doth a queen lack?—but because her prophetic soul told her that she should leave a family well knowing how better to adorn it. Whence Juliana, the glory of her blessed parents, inherited their royal blood in the fourth generation, did not defeat the hopes of the Queen, the mother of a noble race, but raised this from a small temple to its present size and beauty, increasing the glory of her many-sceptered ancestors.²⁸⁴

This epigram demonstrated Anicia Juliana's royal ancestors, her religious piety, and her economic wealth in a very public way.

The illuminated manuscript called the *Vienna Dioscurides* was made at the behest of Anicia Juliana, which further illustrated her wealth, intellect, and patronage. It was a copy of the original *De Materia Medica* compiled by the first-century CE medical doctor Dioscurides. The manuscript commissioned by Anicia Juliana contained instructions on how to cultivate certain herbs and plants for medical purposes. More importantly, it contained an image of Anicia Juliana as the patron to whom the text was dedicated. She is depicted sitting on a golden throne and wearing a golden robe over a royal blue dress, reflecting her status as a patrician and alluding to her imperial lineage. She is pointing to an open book held by a

²⁸³ The Western Roman Emperor Valentinian III married the Eastern Roman Emperor Theodosius II's daughter Licinia Eudoxia and had a daughter named Placidia. Placidia married Olybrius, a western Roman Emperor, and had a daughter named Anicia Juliana. Consequently, Anicia Juliana was descended from both eastern and western Roman emperors. McClanan, "The Empress Theodora," 53.

²⁸⁴ Quoted in McClanan, "The Empress Theodora," 54.

cherub, indicating her status as a woman of letters. She is also pictured with the personifications of Magnanimity and Prudence, who stand on either side of her, and whose attributes she is supposed to share. There is also a poem on the same page of the manuscript, which described the royal lineage of Anicia Juliana and her patronage constructing church buildings:

Behold, with all good praises, Queen, Honoratis hymns you and praises you. The magnanimity of the Anicii, of which family you are a member, goes forth into all the world to speak your praises. For you built the church of the Lord, towering beautifully on high.²⁸⁵

Patronizing the compilation of the *Vienna Dioscurides* reflected the intellect of Anicia Juliana while the construction of the basilica of St. Polyeuktos reflected her piety. Her personal wealth allowed her to be a religious patroness as well as a patroness of letters, and these activities, along with her noble lineage, made her an ideal economic model.

Khadija

As with Byzantine women in late antiquity, early Islamic women who were from elite families and who were economically independent enjoyed substantial social, legal, and political rights. Khadija bint Khuwaylid, also known as Khadija al-Kubra, was a wealthy merchant and was twice-widowed with three children when she met the Prophet Muhammad.²⁸⁶ She was the daughter of a merchant named Khuwaylid ibn Asad and she controlled and operated a very successful trade caravan that ran from Syria to Mecca. Khadija amassed and controlled a considerable amount of wealth, which was not unusual for a woman of her status in sixth-century Mecca.²⁸⁷ Her status as a widow, coupled with her affluence and economic independence, allowed her to initiate marriage in 595 CE with Muhammad, a much poorer man and fifteen years her junior, whom she supported financially as a merchant and continued to support later, when he began to receive heavenly revelations.

²⁸⁵ Connor, *Women of Byzantium*, 110.

²⁸⁶ Walther, *Women in Islam*, 103.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

Khadija and Muhammad were married for twenty-five years, during which time they had six children, four daughters as well as two sons who did not live past childhood. Khadija was Muhammad's first and sole wife until her death in 620 CE at the age of 65. She became the first convert to Islam and is often referred to as the "mother of believers." In addition to being the first convert to Islam, she played a crucial role in funding the nascent Islamic movement during the early seventh century.²⁸⁸ Khadija's status as an older, independent, and very wealthy widow gave her the ability to initiate and propose marriage and to secure her status as the first and sole wife of her husband. As such she wielded a great deal of power in her household and her marriage, providing an economic model for subsequent generations of Muslim women.

Umm Salama and Raytah

Umm Salama was a very wealthy, eighth-century widow who became the first queen of the Abbasid caliphate. As such she wielded a great deal of wealth and influence, before and after her marriage to al-Saffah. Like Khadija, she proposed marriage to her husband, who later played a key role in the Abbasid Revolution and who became the first Abbasid caliph in 750 CE. She possessed enough wealth that she gave al-Saffah money for her own dowry and made him swear that he would not take a second wife or concubine, which he promised to do. Later one of al-Saffah's courtiers, Khalid ibn Safwan, told al-Saffah it was unfortunate that he had sworn to have only one wife and went on to describe the physical qualities of women from different regions. Umm Salama heard of this conversation and had Khalid ibn Safwan beaten; later the courtier, Khalid ibn Safwan, advised al-Saffah that more than one wife led to unhappiness and misfortune and "that he had married a wise lady from a noble family and should not look around for other women."²⁸⁹ After this incident, Khalid ibn Safwan received a large reward from Umm Salama.²⁹⁰ Umm Salama remained the sole wife

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 103-4.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 79.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

of caliph al-Saffah until he died of smallpox in 754 CE. She and al-Saffah had a daughter named Raytah, who later became the future caliph al-Mahdi's first wife in 761-762 CE.²⁹¹ Raytah was entrusted with the keys to the Abbasid treasuries by al-Mansur (her uncle/father-in-law) prior to his death and controlled them until she was joined by her husband al-Mahdi after his father (al-Mansur's) death in 775 CE. Umm Salama's economic independence and considerable wealth allowed her to exercise a good deal of power and through marriage to become the first Abbasid queen. After her husband's death in 754 CE, she continued to wield influence as a wealthy widow, as the sister-in-law of caliph al-Mansur and his wife Arwa, and as the mother of Raytah, caliph al-Mahdi's first wife.

Arwa

Arwa, like her sister-in-law Umm Salama, served as an economic model for Abbasid women due to her independent wealth and social status, her lineage, and her ability to negotiate and secure an advantageous marriage to a future caliph. Arwa, was also known as Umm Musa, was born in 735 CE and was descended from "the southern Arabian kings of the Himyarits."²⁹² According to al-Tabari, her father was Mansur al-Himyari and her brother was Yazid bin Mansur al-Himyari.²⁹³ Arwa came from a wealthy and powerful family and when she married caliph al-Mansur she required her new husband to sign a written agreement that he would not have any other wives or concubines. Initially the caliph agreed and signed this marriage contract; eventually, however, he regretted this decision and wanted to annul the marriage contract. Arwa brought the supreme judge of Egypt to Baghdad to appeal al-Mansur's plea, whose verdict was in favor of Arwa, since she was able to produce the marriage contract with the appropriate clause. Consequently, she was the sole wife of caliph al-Mansur until her death in the tenth year of his reign, after which he established a sizable

²⁹¹ Al-Tabari, *The Abbasid Caliphate in Equilibrium*, 152.

²⁹² Walther, *Women in Islam*, 79.

²⁹³ Al-Tabari, *The Early 'Abbāsī Empire* 551, 142.

harem.²⁹⁴ Before her death in 764 CE Arwa gave birth to two sons, Jafar the Elder, who died before al-Mansur did, and al-Mahdi, who later succeeded his father al-Mansur as caliph and then emancipated and married al-Khayzuran.²⁹⁵

The ideal economic models discussed above represented the appropriate behaviors for women to emulate in the Abbasid caliphate. Arwa, Khadija, and Umm Salama were all elite, independently wealthy women prior to their marriages and were able to secure their status by being the sole wives of their husbands. Khadija and Umm Salama were both previously widowed and proposed marriage to Muhammad and al-Saffa respectively. All of the Muslim economic models were from either elite or noble lineages; al-Khayzuran differs markedly from these women in that she was a slave and not from a noble or elite family. Despite these differences, al-Khayzuran was able to profit socially and economically from her marriage to al-Mahdi and she was able to wield a not inconsiderable amount of power as his widow, similar to the experiences of Khadija and Umm Salama.²⁹⁶ In addition, al-Khayzuran, like Arwa, succeeded in producing surviving male heirs and became mother to future caliphs; this status resulted in al-Khayzuran's continued access to wealth and power after the death of al-Mahdi.

Theodora, like al-Khayzuran, shared similarities and differences with the Byzantine economic models Pulcheria and Anicia Juliana. Both were independently wealthy women from noble families who were praised for their economic expressions of religious piety. While Theodora's origins and lineage were neither affluent nor noble, she too was remembered for her economic expressions of religious piety. Theodora, like Pulcheria, was able to gain spiritual wealth, however she did so within the Monophysite community. In addition, Theodora was an economic patroness like Anicia Juliana, especially in the construction of churches. Pulcheria and Anicia Juliana's familial lineage and independent

²⁹⁴ Walther, *Women in Islam*, 116.

²⁹⁵ Al-Tabari, *The Early 'Abbāsī Empire* 466, 551, 64, 142.

²⁹⁶ Al-Mahdi freed al-Khayzuran and married her. As his wife she received a salary, while he was alive and after his death. Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad*, 38-9, 46, 124.

wealth facilitated their economic activities while Theodora's marriage to Justinian facilitated her activities as a transacting body.

While Al-Khayzuran and Theodora did not come from noble lineages and did not have access to wealth and power at the beginning of their lives, they both were able to elevate themselves socially and economically through their marriages to al-Mahdi and Justinian. As a result of this rise in social status and access to wealth, they were able to emulate the economic models of their respective societies in several key ways. Their status as transacting bodies was achieved through their marriages and their co-rule with their husbands, and was protected by the religious and legal codes of their respective societies.

RELIGIOUS AND LEGAL PROTECTIONS OF WEALTH

Legal codes, both secular and religious, provided economic security for women in late antiquity. Legal codes in the Byzantine Empire secured the financial wealth of women, like dowries, and protected them from signing contracts that coerced them into prostitution. In the Abbasid caliphate, the Quran offered religious protections and economic security for women. Byzantine legal codes and Quranic religious protections allowed Theodora and al-Khayzuran to maintain and secure economic wealth separate from their husbands.

Roman legal codes provided women with important economic protections in regards to marriage, dowries, and divorce. As discussed in Chapter 3, Justinian oversaw the revision and consolidation of the Roman legal codes beginning in 529 CE, four years after his marriage to Theodora, and her influence is evident in several of the codes that directly impacted women, particularly those related to protecting prostitutes and discouraging pandering. Theodora herself benefited from a revision to the legal codes, which allowed her to marry Justinian and to rise to the rank of patrician. Procopius stated that her promotion to the patrician social rank enabled her to possess immediate wealth and power.²⁹⁷ Procopius considered the previous marriage law to be “the most venerable of laws,” and criticized the revised marriage law, which enabled all patricians to “marry courtesans” and women of

²⁹⁷ Procopius, *Secret History* 9, 86.

lower socio-economic status.²⁹⁸ While Procopius denounced the revised marriage law, it improved Theodora's social and economic status immensely, allowing her to become a powerful transacting body.

In addition to marriage laws, laws concerning dowries played a significant role in protecting women as dowries insured the financial security of women who were able to obtain one from their father or families.²⁹⁹ The Justinianic Code argued that dowries were important and should be preserved for wives as they protected a woman financially and rewarded her for having children, thereby providing the state with free citizens.

The cause of the dowry always and everywhere takes precedence, for it is to the public interest for dowries to be preserved to wives, as it is absolutely necessary that women should be endowed for the procreation of progeny, and to furnish the state with freeborn citizens.³⁰⁰

Dowries were critical to a woman's economic status as they provided women with social status and financial security independent of their husband. Dowries were of such importance that a "*paterfamilias* was required to provide all women under his jurisdiction with an adequate dowry and leave an inheritance to any who were still unmarried at his death that might serve as their dowry."³⁰¹ In addition to the dowry, women retained possession of a betrothal gift or dower, a sum of money equal to that of the dowry, gifted to the bride by the groom.³⁰²

Further protections of women and women's dowries came in 529 CE when Justinian reinstituted unilateral divorce for both men and women.³⁰³ The divorce code came with

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 10, 89.

²⁹⁹ Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity*, 15-16.

³⁰⁰ Samuel Parsons Scott, ed., *The Civil Law, Including the Twelve Tables, The Institutes of Gaius, the Rules of Ulpian, the Opinions of Paulus, the Enactments of Justinian, and the Constitutions of Leo*, vol. 6 (New York: AMS, 1973), 3. It should be noted that this statement is the reiteration of a second-century legal opinion.

³⁰¹ Mathew Kuefler, "The Marriage Revolution in Late Antiquity: The Theodosian Code and Later Roman Marriage Law," *Journal of Family History* 32, no. 4 (2007), 352.

³⁰² Ibid., 353-54.

³⁰³ During the second century, divorce could be initiated by either the bride or the groom. In the fourth and fifth centuries, one's ability to divorce became more restricted. Women could only divorce if their husbands were serious criminals such as a murderer or sorcerer while women could be divorced for adultery or sorcery. If

certain stipulations, since “a woman who repudiated her husband without grounds was sent to a convent,” while men who rejected their wives without cause were sent to a monastery.³⁰⁴ Under the law, spouses needed to cite a just cause for divorce. Procopius complained that the new divorce law allowed adulterous women in Byzantine society to create false accusations against their husbands in order to get a divorce settlement, which returned their dowry two-fold.³⁰⁵ Procopius viewed unilateral divorce negatively, arguing that women lied in order to enrich themselves financially at the expense of their husbands, rather than considering the economic protections that the law afforded women.

The Quran, like the Justinianic Code in Byzantium, provided Muslim women with economic protections concerning dowries, marriage agreements, and inheritance. Sharia (Islamic law) is derived from the Quran, legal opinions, and Hadith, which were preserved primarily by Aisha and the Prophet’s other wives. Sura 4 provided legal protections for dowries, divorced women, and the protection of property. Sura 4:4 says: “Give to women their dowers willingly, but if they forego part of it themselves, then use it to your advantage.”³⁰⁶ Sura 4:4 protects women’s dowries and allowed women, if they so chose, to give some of it as a gift to their husbands. Sura 4:5 says: “Do not entrust (their) property God has given you to maintain (on trust), to those who are immature; but feed them and clothe them from it.”³⁰⁷ Sura 4:5 explains that husbands need to be careful with their wives’ property because they hold it in trust for them and that they should use this money to support their wives financially and to provide for their present and future care. In the Islamic tradition, dowries or *mahr* were more like betrothal gifts, wherein the groom or his family paid a negotiated amount that belonged to the bride; this property was meant to provide

anyone divorced for any other reason he or she lost access to the dowry and could not remarry. Ibid., 355.

³⁰⁴ Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity*, 25-26.

³⁰⁵ Procopius, *Secret History* 17.

³⁰⁶ Qur’an 4:4, trans. Ali, 73.

³⁰⁷ Qur’an 4:5, trans. Ali, 73-74.

women with economic security.³⁰⁸ We can see from the case of Khadija, and later Umm Salama, that dowries were sometimes paid by wealthy widows who wanted to remarry. Despite the differences in dowry practices and their efficacy, dowries were meant to serve the same function in Islamic society as they did in Byzantium, to provide women with economic security.

The marriage agreement is another important legal protection of women discussed in the Quran. Sura 5:1 says: “O you who believe [Muslims], fulfill your contracts.”³⁰⁹ It stresses the importance of fulfilling contracts and conditions, including those related to marriage. The importance of the marriage contract in protecting women and its importance in Muslim society is reflected in the story of Arwa and al-Mansur. Arwa and al-Mansur had agreed that she would be his only wife and this was a condition of their marriage contract. Al-Mansur, who was caliph at the time, attempted to circumvent this agreement, and so Arwa took him to court. She won the dispute because she was able to provide the marriage contract as proof of the agreement.³¹⁰ Remaining the sole wife offered several social and economic advantages for women, including increased social status, access to a greater percentage of their husband’s property, and the knowledge that their children would be their husband’s sole heirs.

Inheritance was another legal protection outlined in the Quran. Sura 4:7 says: “Men have a share in what the parents and relatives leave behind at death; and women have a share in what the parents and relatives leave behind. Be it large or small a legal share is fixed.”³¹¹ Sura 4:11 explains the division of inheritance among children; male children inherit twice as much as female children, but if the only heir is a daughter she can receive at most half of her parents’ estate.³¹² If there are no sons and more than one daughter, together they can receive

³⁰⁸ “Mahr,” *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, accessed December 1, 2015, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e1390>.

³⁰⁹ Qur’an 5:1.

³¹⁰ Walther, *Women in Islam*, 116.

³¹¹ Qur’an 4:7.

³¹² *Ibid.*, 4:11.

no more than two-thirds of their parents' estate. Sura 4:12 explains the division of inheritance among husbands and wives; wives inherit one-fourth of their husband's property if they have no children and one-eighth of their property if they do have children. Husbands inherit twice as much as wives; one-half of their wives' property if they have no children and one-fourth of their property if they do have children.³¹³ As a result of these protections Muslim women had the ability to inherit and own property independently, and were guaranteed an inheritance of some size from their parents. In addition, women who were widowed inherited a portion of their husband's property and were able to accumulate wealth in this way; this right is evident in the cases of Khadija, Umm Salama, and al-Khayzuran.

The legal codes in Byzantium and the religious codes based on the Quran and Hadith provided Theodora and al-Khayzuran with economic rights and protections, which allowed them to acquire and maintain their wealth.³¹⁴ In addition, their marriages to Justinian and al-Mahdi facilitated their rise in social status and allowed them to acquire and build wealth, becoming transacting bodies.

ROYAL PROTECTIONS OF WEALTH

Theodora and al-Khayzuran's positions as imperial rulers allowed them to become financially independent from their husbands. Prior to this elevation in their status, they used their physical bodies to acquire wealth. Theodora was a circus performer and actress and al-Khayzuran was part of the imperial harem. In *Secret History*, Procopius described in explicit detail how Theodora acquired wealth as a circus performer, detailing how she sold her body to anyone, as her whole body was meant for giving pleasure to her male clients for whatever price they could afford.³¹⁵ Procopius further stated that Theodora's fortune changed when she became acquainted with the dancer and informant Macedonia after she was exiled by Hecebolus in North Africa. Macedonia, according to Procopius, not only recruited Theodora

³¹³ Ibid., 4:12.

³¹⁴ While Sharia law was not fully developed until after al-Khayzuran's lifetime, the Quran and Hadith dictated custom and law in Muslim societies.

³¹⁵ Procopius, *Secret History* 9.

into her service as an informant but also introduced Theodora to Justinian.³¹⁶ Procopius described how at first Theodora served only as Justinian's concubine, though she was later promoted to the patrician rank, which immediately gave her financial wealth and social status.³¹⁷ Theodora sold her body to acquire wealth as a circus performer and then she elevated her social status first to patrician, which secured both financial wealth and status for Theodora, and then to empress, which allowed her to maintain her economic wealth and protect her economic interests from political rivals. In short, she achieved upward mobility through her actions as a transacting body.

Theodora used her status as empress to acquire wealth from political rivals throughout the Byzantine Empire. In *Secret History*, Procopius related a story of how Theodora had a dream before becoming a patrician, in which she was told that she would never have to worry about financial problems again, as she was destined to journey to Constantinople and marry the "King of Demons."³¹⁸ Procopius, despite his bias against the imperial couple, was correct that Theodora's marriage to Justinian resolved her economic troubles; her humble lineage, however, as well as that of Justinian, meant that political rivals would try and usurp the imperial crown. To prevent this from happening, Theodora acquired wealth from political rivals in order to weaken potential rivals and maintain her and Justinian's political authority.

Theodora maintained both economic and political security by stripping the wealth from, and in some cases deposing, individuals who threatened the crown. John of Cappadocia was one such individual. He held the title of Praetorian Prefect and was elevated to the consulship in 538 CE.³¹⁹ During this time he gained immense power, both financially and politically, which threatened Justinian and Theodora. According to Procopius, Justinian was fond of John, as he was a shrewd politician, and Justinian refused to listen to Theodora's

³¹⁶ Evans, *The Empress Theodora*, 17.

³¹⁷ Procopius, *Secret History* 9.

³¹⁸ Ibid., 13, 105.

³¹⁹ Evans, *The Power Game in Byzantium*, 141-42.

accusations of treason against John.³²⁰ As a result, Theodora conspired with Antonina against John of Cappadocia as a means of acquiring his wealth and removing him from power.³²¹ Procopius reported that Antonina tricked John of Cappadocia into committing treason against Justinian and Theodora and that Theodora used this evidence to strip him of wealth and title and to imprison him.³²² Procopius described similar incidents that involved Theodora stripping wealth away from Senator Theodosius for conspiring with John of Cappadocia against the crown, and from senators who conspired to overthrow both Justinian and Theodora during the Nika Revolt in 532 CE.³²³ In all of these cases, Theodora stripped both title and wealth from these conspirators. Consequently, Theodora's actions as a transacting body, in this case her punishment of those who conspired against her, served to increase her power and economic standing, and that of her husband.

Theodora used a similar strategy later in her reign, in order to punish her generals for their plans to remove her from power and assume control of the empire upon Justinian's death. In 542 CE a plague struck Constantinople and threatened the life of Justinian.³²⁴ Justinian fell ill and had no clear successor.³²⁵ During this period, the Byzantines were at war with the Persians and generals Belisarius and Bouzes had been sent to stop Persian encroachment in the east.³²⁶ The generals heard about Justinian's illness, and decided that upon the death of Justinian, one of them, most likely Belisarius, would declare himself emperor.³²⁷ Justinian eventually recovered, but the plot by Bouzes and Belisarius was not forgotten by Theodora. She recalled both generals to Constantinople and stripped them of

³²⁰ Ibid., 145.

³²¹ Procopius, *Secret History* 4.

³²² In his account, Procopius focused more on his bias against women's involvement in court politics rather than John's willingness to overthrow the imperial couple.

³²³ Procopius, *Secret History* 3.

³²⁴ Evans, *The Empress Theodora*, 59.

³²⁵ Evans, *The Power Game in Byzantium*, 163.

³²⁶ Ibid., 163-164.

³²⁷ Procopius, *Secret History* 3; Potter, "Theodora: Fantasy and Faction."

their titles and estates.³²⁸ According to Procopius, General Bouzes was tortured in Theodora's private chambers for two years and then released.³²⁹ More is known about Theodora's interactions with Belisarius. She confiscated all of his lands, and disbanded and prevented his military men from visiting him.³³⁰ According to Procopius, Belisarius lived in fear of assassins as no news concerning Bouzes had surfaced after they were summoned to Constantinople.³³¹ Eventually Belisarius was able to regain favor with both sovereigns. Justinian returned Belisarius' title and a portion of the confiscated lands. Theodora wrote a letter to Belisarius explaining the reversal in his fortunes:

How you have behaved towards us, my good sir, you know only too well. But I personally owe so much to your wife [Antonina] that for her sake I have resolved to dismiss all charges brought against you, making her a present of your life. So from now on you need have no fear for either your life or your money. How you regard your wife your future conduct will show us.³³²

The letter ends by implying that Belisarius' future status would depend upon his treatment of his wife Antonina.

Theodora ensured the continuation of both her and Justinian's sovereignty, and stopped potential coups, by confiscating the lands and wealth of her political rivals. Theodora's actions served to weaken her enemies, to punish them for their wrongdoing, to deter other wealthy nobles from plotting against the crown, and to increase the wealth and power of the crown.³³³

³²⁸ Potter, "Theodora: Fantasy and Faction."

³²⁹ Procopius, *Secret History* 3.

³³⁰ Evans, *The Power Game in Byzantium*, 166.

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Procopius, *Secret History* 4, 59.

³³³ In *Secret History*, Procopius' view of these activities is quite different: he characterizes the imperial couple as bloodthirsty and money hungry. For Procopius, John of Cappadocia, senators, and military generals were all victims of Theodora's avarice. In *The Magistrates of the Roman State*, John Lydus, a contemporary of Theodora, described the wickedness of John of Cappadocia, as he imprisoned and tortured anyone in his praetorian court who did not pay taxes. Ioannes Lydus, *On Powers or The Magistracies of the Roman State*, trans. Anastasius C. Bandy (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1983), 223. In *Secret History*, Procopius admitted that the feud between Theodora and John of Cappadocia had nothing to do with "his offences against the State;" which he described as extorting money from the common folk, rather it was because

Another example of Theodora's status as a transacting body was her philanthropy; while it did not increase her economic wealth, she was able to acquire political capital and power through her charitable deeds. Procopius stated that once Theodora was promoted to patrician rank she possessed a large fortune.³³⁴ In addition, after she was married and crowned empress she received a large marriage donation that included large estates, which were overseen by her business manager.³³⁵ Her financial resources and status as a transacting body was evident to all on her trip to the Pythion hot springs, where she used her wealth to fund and maintain an entourage of over four thousand. Another public display of imperial wealth was the building of a palace and aqueduct in the town of Pythia for Theodora's use.³³⁶ Finally, she functioned as a transacting body through her generous donations to churches, monasteries, and hospitals between Pythia and Constantinople.³³⁷

Like Theodora, al-Khayzuran also functioned as a transacting body, especially once she married al-Mahdi and became an imperial ruler. Al-Khayzuran's rise to power as an imperial ruler and her corresponding access to economic wealth and security began when she was purchased as a slave by caliph al-Mansur in Mecca. During their interview caliph al-Mansur inquired about her family; al-Khayzuran lied and said that she was an orphan. That is what she thought he wanted to hear, since her having a family could have led to potential threats to his dynasty. Her strategy worked and she was purchased by al-Mansur for his son al-Mahdi. Julia Bray argued that female slaves became an outlet for free male individualism as a slave has no past and no family prestige.³³⁸ Legal jurists during al-Khayzuran's lifetime had not fully consolidated an extensive legal code, like the Justinianic Code, but the Quran

John of Cappadocia had insulted Theodora in front of Justinian. Procopius, *Secret History* 17, 21, trans. Williamson, 128, 143. When analyzing the texts of Procopius and John Lydus together, we see the avarice of John of Cappadocia rather than that of Theodora.

³³⁴ Procopius, *Secret History* 9.

³³⁵ Evans, *The Empress Theodora*, 29.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

³³⁷ Malalas, *Chronicle* 18.441.8-12.

³³⁸ Bray, "Men, Women, and Slaves in Abbasid Society," 138.

and Hadith, on which Sharia laws would eventually be based, provided the legal foundations concerning matters of family inheritance and the treatment of slaves. In the formative years of Islam and during the Abbasid caliphate, the manumission of slaves was considered an act of piety and more so if a female slave bore their master a male child. Sura 2:177 and 24:33 described how the manumission of slaves was regarded as an act of piety before God. In addition, slavery and the treatment of slaves during the Abbasid dynasty differed from the previous Umayyad dynasty, as the majority of Abbasid caliphs had mothers who were slaves from foreign lands, al-Khayzuran being the first of these.³³⁹ The Quran provided religious protections for slaves and al-Khayzuran's entry into the harem initiated her upward economic mobility and her future role as a transacting body within the imperial palace.

It is uncertain if al-Khayzuran received any payment or form of income as a concubine in the harem, though Abbasid female slaves had the ability to earn their own income. Masters might have promoted the economic activities of their slaves as they profited from them selling items in the markets. It is likely then that female slaves would have engaged in semi-independent economic activities as there was no legal prohibition against them making money in the markets, workshops, and as hired political spies.³⁴⁰ During the reign of al-Mansur and al-Mahdi, female slaves (*jawari*) who were educated, especially in poetry and singing, were highly sought after.³⁴¹ During this same period, enslaved women were educated in reading and writing in order to make them marketable to wealthy masters.³⁴² In addition, female slaves were valued for their ability to have conversations on subjects that were of interest to elite men, including astrology, history, Islamic jurisprudence, and mathematics.³⁴³ It is uncertain to what extent al-Khayzuran was educated in these arts prior to joining the harem; she demonstrated intelligence by lying to al-Mansur about her

³³⁹ Ibid., 133-34.

³⁴⁰ Abd al-Kareem Heitty, "The Contrasting Spheres of Free Women and Jawari in the Literary Life of the Early Abbasid Caliphate," *Al-Masaq* 3 (1990): 35.

³⁴¹ Mernissi, *Forgotten Queens of Islam*, 54-55.

³⁴² Caswell, *Slave Girls of Baghdad*, 26.

³⁴³ Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, 58.

family, which made her a good candidate for childbearing and the production of possible Abbasid heirs. After joining the harem, al-Khayzuran studied Islamic jurisprudence and techniques in sensual refinements within al-Mahdi's harem.³⁴⁴ Al-Khayzuran most likely did not succeed in music and poetry. As discussed earlier, Maknunah --- the only challenge to al-Khayzuran's status within the harem ---- was purchased by al-Mahdi for her musical talents. Female slaves were purchased for either their intellectual or physical talents; savvy and gifted slaves, like al-Khayzuran used these talents to fuel their upward social and economic mobility. Al-Khayzuran's talent was not in music or poetry but in her ability to discuss matters of state, including the law. In addition, she was valued because she was believed to be an orphan; being an orphan made one a good candidate for bearing potential heirs as one would not have had a family to make claims or seek to advance themselves through the imperial family.

Al-Khayzuran's social and economic status was further elevated after she provided two male heirs for al-Mahdi. Al-Khayzuran received an annual income of 160,000,000 dirhams during her tenure as Queen mother. This annual income came from taxes paid to the state.³⁴⁵ In addition to her annual income, al-Khayzuran accumulated wealth through the land and property she owned around the capital city of Baghdad.³⁴⁶ She owned vast estates not only around Baghdad but as far away as Egypt.³⁴⁷ It is uncertain exactly how wealthy al-Khayzuran was; we know in addition to these land holdings she was able to purchase a piece of cloth worth fifty thousand dinars, and that eighteen thousand dresses were found in her closet after her death.³⁴⁸ The expensive textiles and clothing indicate the full extent of her wealth, as only a queen would have been able to purchase as many textiles, and of the quality, which were found in her closet. Al-Khayzuran's wealth was handled by her personal

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 59.

³⁴⁵ Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad*, 124-125.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 120.

³⁴⁷ Andre Clot, *Harun al-Rashid and The World of the Thousand and One Nights*, trans. John Howe (New York: New Amsterdam Books, 1989), 183.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 50.

business manager Umar, who was a shrewd, honest, and efficient accountant. Abbott translated Ibn Abdus' account of a letter from al-Khayzuran to Umar regarding financial matters:

Your letter [Umar] has arrived with its numerous entries. You shall not be excessive in any of your affairs. Continue with the best that you have, and the best that I have will continue for you. And know that rare is the thing that increases except to decrease again. For decrease destroys the much just as the little grows into the more.³⁴⁹

The letter from al-Khayzuran to Umar conveys her trust in his judgement; it cautioned him to moderation, to "not be excessive," and to continue the good job that he had been doing. Umar's financial abilities were highly regarded by al-Khayzuran and by her son al-Rashid, so much that al-Rashid employed Umar after al-Khayzuran's death to stop the corruption of and a possible revolt by the Egyptian governor.³⁵⁰ Umar was a skilled advisor and did not abuse his position, which earned him the trust of both al-Khayzuran and her son al-Rashid. Al-Khayzuran received a substantial annual income as Queen-mother and entrusted it to Umar, a very competent and trustworthy financial manager.

Al-Khayzuran used her wealth to protect and secure the power of the Abbasid caliphate; this impact is especially evident after al-Mahdi's death in 785 CE. At this time her wealth increased further due to inheritance laws that granted her a portion of al-Mahdi's estate after his death. As discussed earlier, according to the Quran, wives received a portion of their husband's property at his death. While this amount would have been divided between al-Khayzuran and al-Mahdi's first wife Raytah, the sum would have been significant as al-Mahdi was a caliph. After news of al-Mahdi's death reached Baghdad rioting broke out. Al-Khayzuran used her wealth to maintain political control by paying off rioting soldiers in the capital who were demanding their salary; this step was necessary as both of her sons were away from the capital when news spread of al-Mahdi's death.³⁵¹ Al-Khayzuran quickly

³⁴⁹ Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad*, 121.

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 122-24.

³⁵¹ Al-Tabari, *The Abbasid Caliphate in Equilibrium*, 5-6.

summoned two advisors, al-Rabi and Yahya, to assist with the rioters, however, only al-Rabi answered the summons; Yahya feared the wrath of al-Hadi if the new caliph found out that he had followed the commands of his mother al-Khayzuran.³⁵² Together al-Khayzuran and al-Rabi gathered enough funds to pay the rioting soldiers a two year salary, effectively quelling the rioters and restoring order to Baghdad.³⁵³ The Abbasid dynasty was in a vulnerable state after news of al-Mahdi's death reached Baghdad, yet al-Khayzuran's actions as a transacting body maintained and strengthened the power of the Abbasid dynasty.

Al-Khayzuran's wealth was also used to maintain and strengthen the Abbasid caliphate by financing infrastructure and public works projects. As discussed above, al-Khayzuran purchased and preserved sacred religious buildings in Mecca, the House of the Nativity and Arqam's House. In addition, al-Khayzuran financed the construction of water wells not only in Mecca but also in other regions, including the Palestinian region of Ramlah, which was named after her, and the construction of a river channel near Baghdad.³⁵⁴ Al-Khayzuran's substantial wealth, and her deployment of it, conveys her importance and the powerful position that she occupied within the Abbasid imperial court. Al-Khayzuran's rise from a slave to a queen resulted in her increased access to wealth and her thereby political power. Her economic wealth and power increased further as the mother of two caliphs. As a transacting body, al-Khayzuran received her own annual salary, she owned vast estates and personal goods, she employed staff to manage her wealth, and she used this wealth to preserve her political power and finance infrastructure projects throughout the Abbasid caliphate.

CONCLUSION

Both Theodora and al-Khayzuran acquired economic wealth when they married. In some respects they were able to follow the examples set by the ideal models, women such as

³⁵² Ibid.

³⁵³ Ibid., 546, 6.

³⁵⁴ Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad*, 120.

Pulcheria, Anicia Juliana, Khadija, Umm Salama, Raytah, and Arwa. The primary difference between Theodora and al-Khayzuran and these women were that Theodora and al-Khayzuran began their lives as slaves and concubines whereas most of the other women were born into wealth and high social status. Theodora and al-Khayzuran were able to improve their social status through their marriages to Justinian and al-Mahdi. Along with this upward social mobility, they had increasing access to wealth and by extension power. They were able to acquire this wealth through their status as female rulers and to protect and maintain it through legal and religious codes like the Justinianic Code, the Quran, and Hadith. As queens, both Theodora and al-Khayzuran maintained their own economic wealth separate from their imperial husbands. Theodora received a large marriage donation and received large estates, in the same way al-Khayzuran received her annual salary along with her properties. They both maintained their political power by quelling revolts and through philanthropy. Nonetheless, Procopius depicted Theodora as an avaricious ruler and al-Tabari described how al-Khayzuran used finances to end the riots in Baghdad after the death of her husband al-Mahdi. Although their respective male commentators put their own spin on these transacting bodies, perhaps because they challenged existing paradigms for women and wealth, both imperial women had access to wealth and used it to advance their political power.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Theodora and al-Khayzuran achieved upward mobility through the use of their female bodies. According to the sources from late antiquity, they were both were sex slaves who were able eventually to become the highest-ranking and most powerful women within their respective societies. As female rulers they exercised political, religious, and economic power through a variety of avenues, including funding the construction of religious buildings, being charitable to the poor, undertaking religious pilgrimages, protecting the weak, financing infrastructure improvements, and quelling political dissent. Theodora and al-Khayzuran exercised power in ways similar to the ideal models, Domitia and Helena, for Theodora, and Aisha and Fatima, for al-Khayzuran, to whom they were directly and indirectly compared; their lineage and social status, however, differed significantly from these models. Theodora's upward mobility from prostitute to empress challenged the ideal model for Procopius. In *Secret History*, Procopius focused extensively on Theodora's low-born status and occupation before becoming empress and what he perceived to be her resultant character flaws. Al-Khayzuran's humble origins were not the issue for the historians who wrote about her; rather it was al-Khayzuran's involvement in political affairs and her perceived involvement in the death of her son al-Hadi that was remembered by al-Tabari and criticized by later Abbasid historians.

Writers from late antiquity discussed in this project, Procopius, Malalas, al-Tabari, al-Masudi, defined appropriate behaviors for female rulers to emulate. The lives of ideal models offered a basis on which to discipline and punish Theodora and al-Khayzuran, by means of their historical narratives, for not conforming to appropriate gender roles in their societies. When Theodora and al-Khayzuran did act in accordance to the ideal models they were praised by male writers in the historical records. Prior to their new role as imperial rulers they were objects of desire for men, but once they ascended to their new roles as imperial

women they were expected to act piously through charitable works and were valued for their fecundity. Their marriages and consequent upward mobility allowed both imperial women to have access to power, which they used to protect their dynasties from usurpers. When Theodora and al-Khayzuran violated the appropriate models of imperial femininity, their actions were condemned in the historical record as a means of reinforcing positive behavior.

This thesis has illustrated how male writers in late antiquity constructed and perpetuated gender roles for imperial women. Theodora and al-Khayzuran challenged the existing paradigm for imperial rulers as former slaves who advanced up the social ladder. In chapter two, “Female Bodies,” both Theodora and al-Khayzuran challenged this paradigm by participating in government affairs. Procopius’ attack on Theodora in *Secret History* revealed his gender bias against women, especially women in political power. This treatment is similar to the silence al-Tabari provides about al-Khayzuran in his *History of Kings and Prophets*; al-Tabari implicated al-Khayzuran in the death of her son al-Hadi and did not emphasize her political prowess. Both Procopius and al-Tabari reinforced acceptable roles for imperial women to emulate based on previous ideal models. For Procopius, his ideal model in Domitia stayed away from political affairs in the same way the depiction of Aisha’s role in the Battle of the Camel reinforced the gendered bias of women’s absence from government affairs in the Islamic world. Nonetheless, *Secret History* was an invective attack on the imperial couple and the warnings al-Tabari provided in *History of Kings and Prophets* reinforced acceptable behaviors for imperial women during the formative periods of both empires.

Piety, philanthropy, and fecundity were acceptable female gender roles that contemporaries and historians likely expected of both Theodora and al-Khayzuran. Just as Procopius and al-Tabari used ideal models to construct gender roles for imperial women, other historians, chroniclers, and orators used ideal models to reinforce acceptable behaviors for imperial women to emulate. Chapter three, “Religious Bodies,” has shown how both Theodora and al-Khayzuran conformed to the ideal religious models and their writers praised them for their efforts. Theodora’s pilgrimages and al-Khayzuran’s philanthropy were examples that illustrated acceptable female gender roles. In praising Theodora and al-Khayzuran’s positive behaviors, these male writers created new ideals for their successors, Sophia and Zubaidah, to follow.

Chapter four, “Transacting Bodies,” has illustrated Theodora and al-Khayzuran’s acquisition and use of their imperial wealth. Being charitable was an acceptable behavior illustrated in chapter three but chapter four explained how both imperial women used their wealth to secure their political power. Theodora and al-Khayzuran’s acquisition of wealth allowed them to have agency over their own physical bodies. The establishment of legal codes and religious doctrines protected the wealth of both imperial women, as well as other women in their society. Theodora and al-Khayzuran were able to acquire and maintain wealth due to the legal and religious protections within their respective societies and both used this wealth to enhance and consolidate their own political power.

Despite the similarities between Theodora and al-Khayzuran in their life trajectory, from slaves to empresses, their male writers depicted the expectations of both these female rulers differently. Procopius’ depiction of Theodora was of a former prostitute who violated the realm of the sacredness of the female space of the woman’s quarter by persecuting male aristocrats by stripping them of land and wealth. In *Secret History*, Procopius viewed Theodora as one who violated the social hierarchy and once she came into power, used her new status as empress to strip elite men and women of their wealth and status. Procopius’ expectation of Theodora in *Secret History* was to be docile and obedient like the ideal model Domitia. The Monophysite Church Fathers, John of Ephesus and Michael the Syrian, also had gendered expectations of Theodora. She was expected to be pious and nurturing and this is how she was depicted, as a devout empress and champion of the Monophysite faith. John Malalas, though not a member of the Monophysite community, also portrayed Theodora as a pious empress who devoted her time and energy to performing charitable acts, especially in the city of Antioch, which was his hometown. These male writers conveyed similar gendered expectations of Empress Theodora, that she should be pious, nurturing, and generous. Yet how these authors’ depicted Theodora varied significantly. Procopius depicted Theodora as corrupt, licentious, and generally amoral, while John Malalas, John of Ephesus, and Michael the Syrian depicted Theodora as pious, nurturing, and generous. Al-Khayzuran, like Theodora, was subject to similar gendered expectations as a female ruler in the Abbasid caliphate; despite this, how she was depicted varied from that of Theodora.

Unlike Theodora, al-Khayzuran was not accused by her male writers, al-Tabari and al-Masudi, of violating the social hierarchy within the Abbasid caliphate when she was

manumitted and became queen, and later queen regent. Al-Tabari and al-Masudi did not negatively portray al-Khayzuran's early life as a slave the same way that Procopius did Theodora's early life as a sex slave. Instead, both al-Tabari and al-Masudi discussed al-Khayzuran's political involvement during the reign of her husband al-Mahdi, and her sons al-Hadi and al-Rashid. Al-Tabari discussed at length the potential involvement of al-Khayzuran in the death of her son al-Hadi, while al-Masudi focused on the political maneuvering al-Khayzuran conducted from within the harem, especially her alliance with the former Umayyad princess Munza. For both Abbasid writers, al-Khayzuran's new social status from slave to queen was never an issue; rather, it was her role in court politics, her immense influence, and her possible involvement in the death of her son, a caliph, that were issues of concern and criticism. Abbasid gendered expectations concerning women and politics was heavily influenced by the actions of Aisha at the Battle of the Camel and how her political participation was interpreted negatively, both at the time and in later histories.

The gendered expectations to which Theodora and al-Khayzuran were subject were created during the formation of two new political dynasties, the Justinianic dynasty and the Abbasid caliphate. In order to maintain appropriate gendered expectations during the formative periods within these societies, male writers, both Byzantine and Abbasid, reinforced acceptable forms and expressions of femininity. In the Byzantine Empire, Procopius' *Secret History* reinforced notions of acceptable behavior for a female imperial ruler with his ideal model Domitia. According to Procopius, female rulers should be high-born, from a good family, and they should remain uninvolved in politics. Piety was another characteristic that imperial women were expected to have. This expectation is evident in the writings of John of Ephesus, John Malalas, and Michael the Syrian. By perpetuating these gendered expectations, Byzantine male writers regulated acceptable behaviors for imperial women to follow and adhere to. This occurred in the Abbasid caliphate as well, as al-Tabari and al-Masudi reinforced the negative stigma of women's involvement in the political sphere associated with Aisha. Despite the differences in time, place, and religion, similar ideal gender roles were enforced and they helped reinforce the establishment of new political regimes.

Understanding how gender roles were constructed and perpetuated in late antiquity provides an opportunity to understand how gender roles are constructed in our own present

day and age. The comparison of Theodora and al-Khayzuran in this thesis drew on a variety of similarities of acceptable forms of femininity from two separate empires that were divided by time and space. Despite the two-hundred-year separation, these gender roles for women, especially for noble women, were strikingly similar. Acceptable forms of femininity were used by contemporaries and historians as a way to control and pacify elite women, in this case, as a way to mold Theodora and al-Khayzuran into ideal female rulers of their nascent dynasties. Positive depictions of ideal models were used to encourage acceptable behavior for both Theodora and al-Khayzuran. Yet when both Theodora and al-Khayzuran deviated from acceptable forms of femininity they were slandered and accused of being avarice, immoral, and ruthless. The use of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* was beneficial to this analysis as the evidence illustrated how male writers disciplined and punished female bodies.

The comparative analysis of Theodora and al-Khayzuran is only one facet of gender construction in late antiquity. Future research could analyze the construction of masculinity as related to their husbands --- Justinian and al-Mahdi --- in order to gather a complete gender analysis of imperial rulers in late antiquity. Justinian and al-Mahdi were discussed in this project but there needs to be a more careful analysis of both these male rulers to see how they were compared to previous ideal models and the extent to which their behavior was just as gender-constrained as that of their wives. Comparing and contrasting the acceptable roles and actions of female and male imperial rulers could provide a fuller picture of how gender and authority operated in late antiquity.

Another avenue of future research would be a trans-regional analysis of gender and authority across Afro-Eurasia in late antiquity. Farther to the east, the Tang Dynasty in China witnessed the rise of a very powerful ruler, Empress Wu Zetian (690-705 CE), who was the emperor's concubine. Wu rose to power after becoming the emperor's wife, and continued to rule after his death. In Persia, Boran (630-631 CE) ruled as queen of the Sasanian Empire for a short period but was influential in bringing peace and prosperity to an Empire that had been at war with Byzantium. Irene, queen regent of the Byzantine emperor and her son Constantine VI, was brought to Constantinople during a bridal show, and was purchased by Emperor Constantine V for his son Leo IV. There are striking similarities between Irene and al-Khayzuran's rise to power, from being purchased for their future spouses to their suspected involvement in their sons' deaths; but al-Khayzuran ruled from within the palace

alongside her son's vizier, whereas Irene, after the death of her husband, named herself *basileus*, the title reserved for the male emperor. To the west, Brunhilda (543-613 CE), a Visigothic queen, ruled Austrasia and Burgundy on behalf of her sons and later her grandsons. Fredegund, a Frankish queen and contemporary of Brunhilda, began as a sex slave, eventually becoming queen and then regent for her son. A trans-regional analysis of these female rulers, stretching from East Asia to Western Europe, would provide a more thorough understanding of how gender and authority operated during the later period of late antiquity.

The examination of gender roles in late antiquity also provides insight into how gender roles are constructed and understood in the present, especially with a comparison of gender roles between a Christian society and an Islamic society in a post 9/11 era. Gender analysis reveals power structures and how those power structures operate in society. Analyzing the historical narrative of Theodora and al-Khayzuran reveals similar power structures that seek to control and discipline women who do not follow societal gender expectations. This is especially true in a post 9/11 era, as Muslim women are viewed as oppressed because of the wearing of the veil, *hijab*, or *burka*. This Orientalist mentality from the "West" depicts Muslim women as "weak" and in need of rescuing from "aggressive" Muslim men. "Western" women are also restricted by gendered expectations concerning their appearance. "Western" images of women promote a sexualized ideal, characterized by thinness, whiteness, and youth that they must conform to and when "western" women do not conform to these gender stereotypes they are negatively discussed in the media, much as Theodora was negatively portrayed by Procopius in *Secret History*.

Gendered expectations of women exist in all societies and time periods. It is important to understand gendered expectations for late antique, elite women like Theodora and al-Khayzuran, namely maternity, piety, and generosity, and how these expectations transcended time, place, and religion. Understanding late antique gender expectations helps us better understand the roles available to women in Europe and the Near East during this period, as well as the Middle Ages, the Modern Era, and the present. Women in many European and Near Eastern societies today, especially elite women, are still expected to be maternal, nurturing, pious, and generous. When present-day women do not conform to

gendered expectations they are depicted negatively like Theodora and al-Khayzuran were when they involved themselves in politics.

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